



Torture Princess

◆ Fremd Torturchen ◆

Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by
Saki Ukai

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◆◆◆◆ Elisabeth's Diary

overcast skies, unpleasantly chilly
No fights Against demons, but the final battle has already begun.

I'm writing this during a brief lull in the battle. It had been some time since I last read back through this diary, and I must say, I'm quite shocked. Why did that lout Vlad have to pen an entry? The man is dead. He and Lewis felled each other. And because of that, the end of the world began in earnest. Alice has discarded everything save revenge, and yet again, the world is on the path to annihilation. It was once saved by a person from another world, and now, a different person from another world is in the process of destroying it. However, Kaito Sena loved. Alice hated. That was the only difference, I daresay. Saving the world and destroying it are both but matters of personal selfishness. And the rest of us who wrote in this diary were the exact same. All of us merely persisted in our selfishness. Once, the Butcher betrayed all of creation for the woman he loved. What would he say, I wonder, if he saw the state the world is in today? He wouldn't laugh at the scores of deaths, I imagine. I'm certain he would lament them.

Hina stayed by her beloved's side to the very end. Ah, what a kind girl she was. She was dear to me, and I shan't ever forget her. Not her cooking, not her voice, not her smile. Not ever. I do so love that Hina. As for Vlad, I have nothing to say. The man was a devil and a scoundrel. That was all he was. Perhaps that was all he needed to be. And finally, Kaito Sena once saw his selfishness through. Even now, those words he wrote at the end still remain in this diary.

I want you to know something.

I love you both.

From the bottom of my heart.

Shut your damned mouth, I say to that. Shut your goddamned mouth. I wish I were able to say it to him back then, to that smile of his. I've wanted that for a long, long time.

For of the two of us,

my love for Kaito Sena far exceeds his for me.

If only it were possible to go back. Back to those halcyon days.

Back to those days I spent with Kaito and Hina.

Sadly, that wish will never come true.

Today's menu portable combat rations.

My reaction I miss Hina's cooking.

Today's Kaito sleeping.

Today's Kaito 2 The fool.

That should about do it for today's portion.

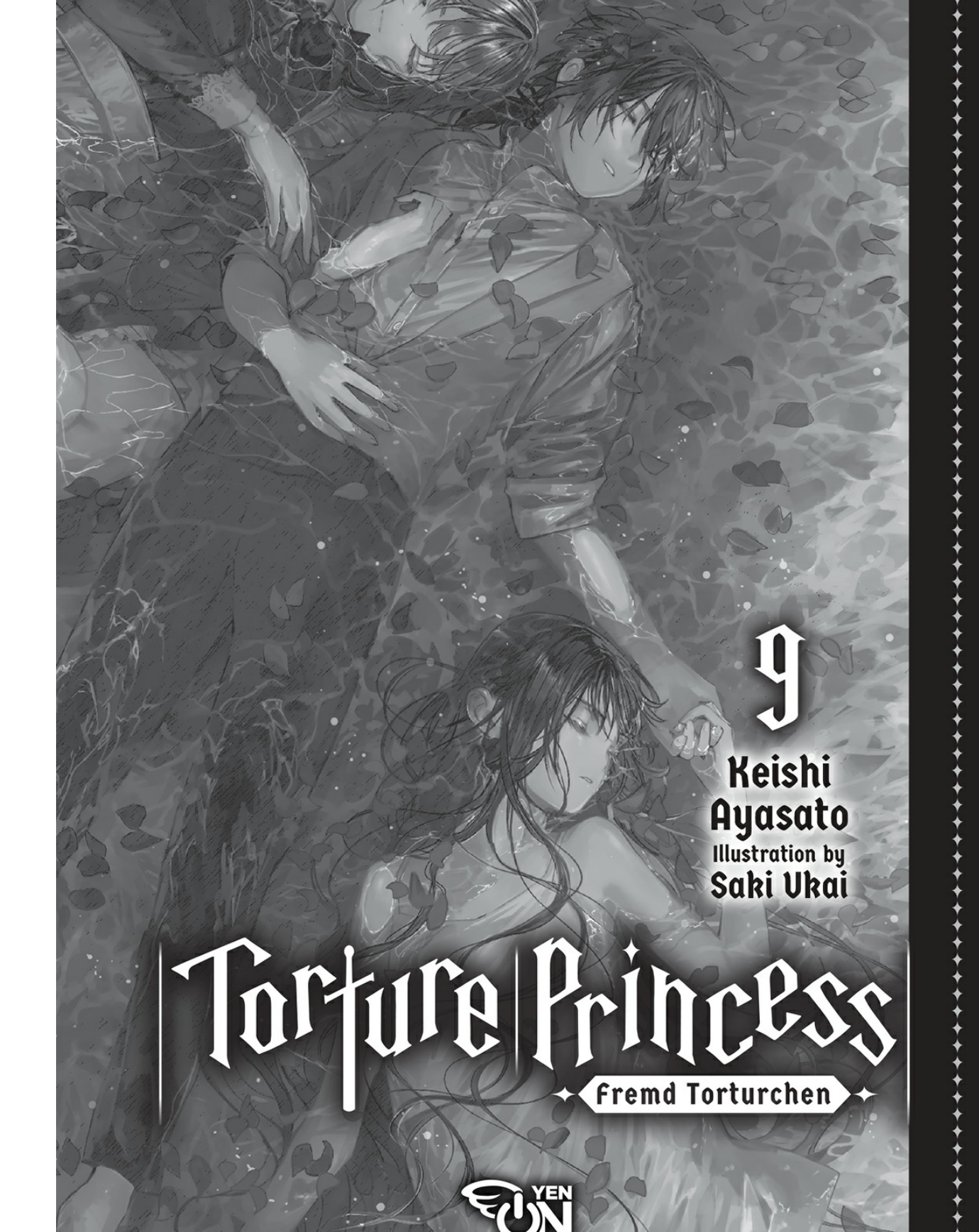
'Tis time for the final battle to begin.











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**Keishi
Ayasato**
Illustration by
Saki Ukai

Torture Princess

— fremd Torturchen —


New York

Copyright

Torture Princess: Fremd Torturchen Volume 9

Keishi Ayasato

Illustration by Saki Ukai

Translation by Nathaniel Hiroshi Thrasher Cover art by Saki Ukai

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The Final Miracle

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The Final Miracle

It's time for a story of a boy.

His death was as meaningless as that of a worm—a death most pitiful, most unseemly, most cruel, and most gruesome.

Ordinarily, there is no life after death. But because his soul was summoned to another world, the boy received precisely that opportunity. In truth, he had no desire to be brought back to life. Nevertheless, as soon as he was made flesh again, he was made to serve an overbearing master.

That master was the very person who summoned him: the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu.

She had the pride of a wolf and was as lowly as a sow, a sinner ordered by the Church to butcher fourteen ranked demons and the people who had formed contracts with them. Once the task was complete, she herself was destined to face execution. She brought the boy back, and when all was said and done, he made the choice to continue serving her.

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu's bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.

The boy chose to live a life that would bring about such a tale.

But the world betrayed that expectation, and the boy's destiny was radically transformed.

It's time for a story of a hero.

The world once very nearly met a tragic end. However, that seemingly immutable fate was altered by a single person. And the one who accomplished that miraculous feat was a boy who had reincarnated from another world.

He got a chance at life, then had a number of experiences, some horrifying

and some irreplaceable.

Then after a long series of battles, he obtained a colossal amount of mana and used it to save someone precious to him.

And while he was at it, he saved the world.

By sacrificing himself.

After burdening himself with God and Diablo, the boy fell into a deep slumber at the World's End. Thanks to his deeds, the people of the world managed to avoid the apocalypse. The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome.

One could say they lived happily ever after.

As an aside, there was one little fact. Hardly any knew it, and it was of little true importance.

The fact was, the boy and hero were the same person.

Thus did the story of admiration and folly and love come to its end.

After that, they say, everyone lived in comfort and peace forever after.

“Oh, were it only that simple.”



Right before Elisabeth and Alice's blows met, someone reached out and caught them.

The ensuing gale force sent the person's tattered cloak flapping about. Their hood hung low, obscuring their face, but whoever they were, they had just caught the blades without so much as breaking a sweat.

Elisabeth frowned.

She could tell—if the person hadn't stepped in, she was the one whose chest would have been gouged out. She looked at the newcomer holding the blades. They really did resemble the Butcher...except for their hands.

Their hands were human.

This time, she had no choice but to admit it.

A hot tear

casually rolled down the Torture Princess's cheek.

And with a thousand different emotions swelling up inside her, Elisabeth Le Fanu spoke.

“—————Kaito, is that you?”

The newcomer silently gave each of their blades a shove, and Elisabeth and Alice both leaped back. Upon landing, they reassumed their combat stances. The figure standing between them pulled back their hood.

Now their face was plainly visible.

The first thing that tumbled out of the tattered cloak was a mop of long dark hair, followed shortly by fair skin. Then came a pair of blinking eyes as tranquil as a lake shore. The figure's hair was the color of the night sky, and their eyes were the color of bones that had been burned to ash.

Elisabeth choked out a murmur.

“You.”

The person in the cloak was not Kaito Sena.

It was, however, a woman Elisabeth knew well.

The woman in question was the centerpiece of the Church's religion and, at the moment, a fugitive. She was the savior of all creation and a sinner without peer, mother to everything and an impartial reaper. She was the person who reconstructed the world, and she was the person who had beckoned its end.

After a small shake of the head, Elisabeth spoke once more.

“I can hardly say I expected to see you here, Saint.”

The genuine Suffering Woman returned Elisabeth's gaze. The faintest of smiles crossed her face.

Then the Saint began her gentle speech.

“We meet again, Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu. I don't believe I've seen you since your dream. I'm sorry to have startled you somewhat, but now my wish to see you once more has finally been granted.”

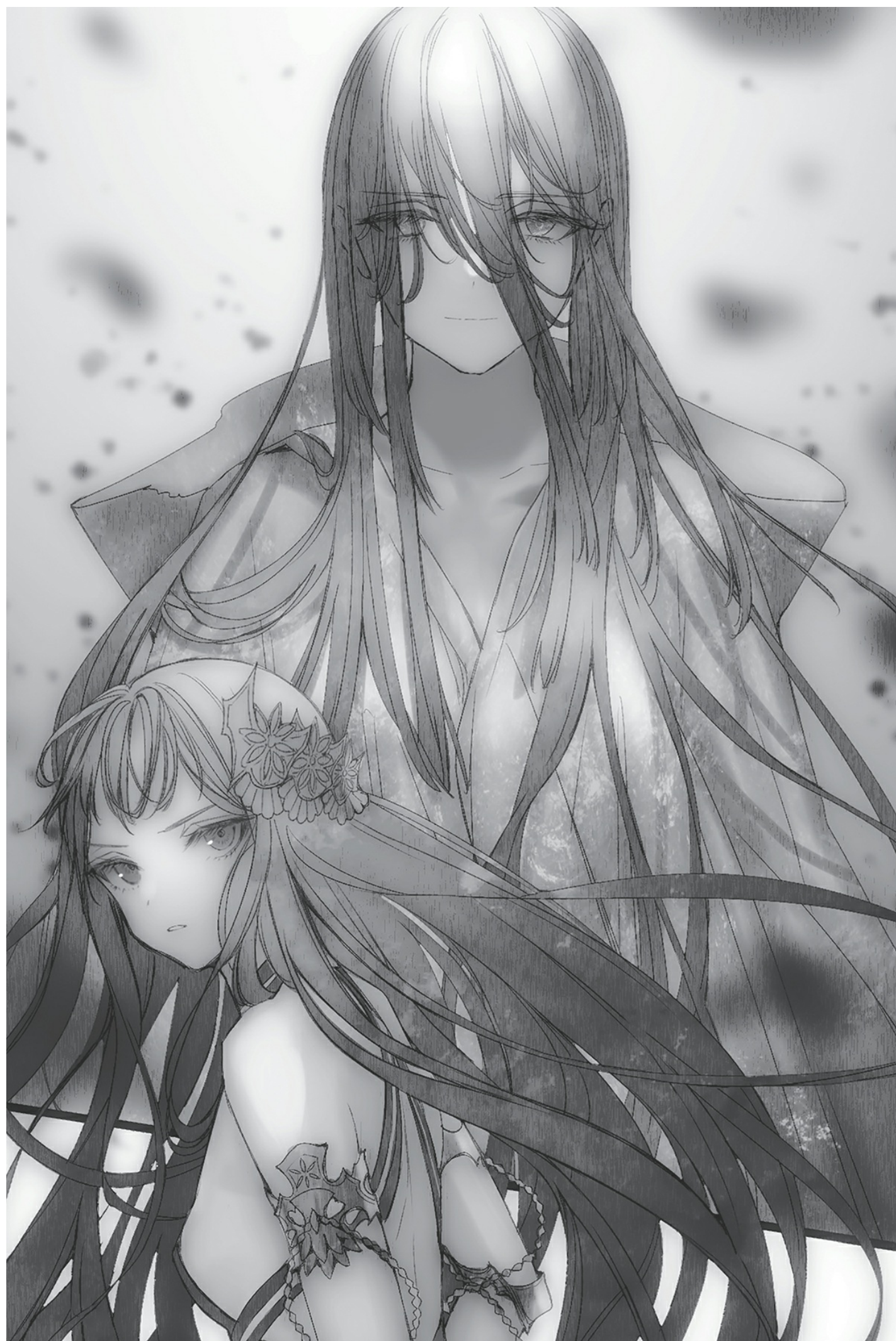
“I...take it that means you’ve not come as my foe?”

“Much to the contrary, in fact. Through God and Diablo—two entities I once harbored within my body—I heard his voice and came to rescue you. He’s unable to come out here himself, but he was able to open a door and speak to me through it. Now I am here to deliver those words to you.”

She extended one hand toward the Torture Princess. Her skin resembled freshly driven snow, and sure enough, there was no hostility in the gesture. The hatred that had once colored her laughter was now gone and forgotten.

“I impart unto you A Message from Him.”

Elisabeth’s eyes went wide. The crystal was farther away than the World’s End. Touching it accomplished nothing, and hearing voices from within was impossible. Yet the Saint was claiming that she had partially overcome that divide.



Sure enough, though, Elisabeth could faintly sense Kaito Sena's presence coming from the woman before her.

She could sense that kind, vaguely foolish warmth that had once always accompanied her.

Almost on reflex, Elisabeth took the Saint's hand. That alien quality her palm once had was no more. Now it was faintly warm and faintly soft. The Saint and the Torture Princess looked each other in the eye.

And not a moment later,

a massive bombardment rained down upon them.



The emanations of pain-and hate-filled magic bore a close resemblance to screams.

Go on, cry out. Complain about your pain to your heart's content. Crush your throats. Burn your lungs. Your tongues and eyes and limbs have been torn from you. You are bound now as fixed batteries, and even death is denied to you. You hurt. For there is pain. You hate. For there is hatred.

However, they didn't know who it was they should hate.

They didn't even understand why this was happening to them.

Let's make the story even simpler, then.

What would a person hate in a situation like that? That's an easy enough question to answer.

It's everything.

They would hate the entire world.

Once someone's pain reached a certain threshold, it burned away any sense of reason they might have had. By screaming, the fixed batteries were able to spread their hatred to their surroundings. Linear blasts of magic burst forth from their mouths, accompanied by heat and shock waves.

Several paladins had emerged from the underground tomb upon catching sight of the Saint, and a good dozen of them were burned to a crisp. Flesh and

blood and armor alike melted into the ground, and the bones peeking up from beneath the black sludge crumbled into dust.

Elisabeth watched their grotesque transformations out of the corner of her eye as she waited for the light to pass.

A massive shield stood before her—a wall of briars the Saint had conjured.

Blocked by the wall, the blinding light passed behind them and faded away.

The briars' roots were coiled around the Saint's arm. Her already-tattered cloak split even further, and she began bleeding all over. That aside, that single wall was all she needed to block the attack. Whether she wished it or not, the Suffering Saint's very existence was rooted in the concept of self-sacrifice, and her magic reflected that fact.

“Hurting yourself to protect yourself? What a peculiar technique. I must say, I'm a little disappointed that didn't kill you.”

The hollow murmur came from Alice—the same little girl who'd given the order for the fixed batteries to fire.

She pursed her lips with her hands clasped behind her back. Her blue dress was just as adorable as always, yet the way she looked in it now gave Elisabeth the impression of something that it never had before.

It reminded her of a gargantuan stomach.

To her, Alice seemed like a bloated organ, hideously pulsating and ever ravenous.

Elisabeth shuddered in horror as she realized why she felt that way.

The amount of mana Alice was wielding was unusually large. And what's more, it was growing steadily.

It didn't make sense.

At the moment, she already had more mana at her disposal than the Torture Princess did. Now that was always going to happen eventually. The Fremd Torturchen was a limitless vessel. The fact that she had the capacity to surpass Elisabeth was the whole reason she was even there.

The problem was...

...’tis too fast! What in the blazes did she even... How many did she consume, and where did she even do it?

“As long as you die this time, I think it should be fine. It’s okay, remember! We’re allll going to die together!”

Alice smiled. *Cheerily*. She raised her right arm high, and flower petals began swirling azure around her fingers.

The fixed batteries opened their mouths in unison.

In an instant, she and the batteries would unleash a magical technique coupled with raw magical destruction at the same time.

Then, out of the blue, Alice’s arm got rent to the side.

Red blood shot out from the wound and sprayed her in the face. However, she didn’t so much as twitch an eyebrow.

The blood transformed into a fresh wave of petals, and most of it gathered at Alice’s wrist to heal her wound. Some of it, though, took on a different form and coalesced into a bizarre-looking swarm of bread-and-butterflies.

The swarm flew at Alice’s attacker, shedding off butter-colored scales in its wake.

The slender woman beat a hasty retreat with her silver hair fluttering behind her. “Rgh! Looks like I’m not going to get anywhere trying to take her down.”

Elisabeth recognized her voice in an instant. She called to the woman by name. “Izabella!”

Izabella tried to reply by giving her a wave.

The moment she did, though, another bombardment rained down on them. The screamed blasts were as simple as they were powerful. However, they made up for that with sheer quantity. The linear attacks came from both high and low, and Izabella had to dance her way between all of them. She cast off her cloak in midair before safely landing back on the ground.

There was a limit to how much she could dodge, however, and she slid in

behind the Saint's shield before her luck had a chance to run out.

She stood beside Elisabeth and panted for breath. A good chunk of the mechanical section of her face had been melted like butter. She had the butterfly scales to thank for that, no doubt. Izabella forced the gears in her cheek to spin faster than usual.

By the look of it, she was having to accelerate the rate at which her organic parts regrew themselves.

When she turned to face her two shieldmates, her blue and purple eyes widened a bit. As the leader of the Holy Knights, seeing the Saint in the flesh like that probably affected her more than most. However, she valiantly regained her composure, then spoke.

"I apologize for my delayed arrival. I was talking to my men patrolling the city about revising our defensive perimeter when it all happened. At the moment, I have them heading up the evacuation efforts. As for you, uh, ma'am, I'm sorry, but you're not the most important thing on my plate right now. Madam Elisabeth, have you noticed?"

"Noticed what, Izabella? Do you mean to say there's a matter more pressing than what's going on right in front of us?"

"There is. Those fixed batteries aren't just here. They're appearing all over the capital. Demon grandchildren, too. And from the reports I'm getting...Alice attacked a series of towns and villages on her way here. We're getting distress calls from some, but there's probably far more that were hit, and even the ones *with* survivors were all but wiped out."

Her expression was racked with grief. Elisabeth nodded.

That was a method only the Fremd Torturchen could have used. Furthermore, it was one that had been unavailable to her back when she was operating within the framework of rebellion and following its strict methods and logic.

There was no limit to the amount of mana Alice could hold within herself. She had no laws she was beholden to, and as someone who was already dead, she had nowhere to run.

As long as she had vast quantities available for her consumption, she had little

reason to inquire about their quality, nor did she have any need to consider the bill that might eventually come due. She could simply make like a swarm of locusts, descending and eating ravenously until nothing remained. Then, upon finishing one bloody plate, she could just toss it aside and move on to the next one. She would devour and devour with no regard paid for maintaining the world's balance and, in doing so, make herself ruler of the dining table.

Elisabeth gave her tongue a small click.

"Ah, I see... That explains her vast reserves of mana, I suppose."

"We thought she had started a war on us, but we're not the only ones who have suffered losses. The mixed-race folk are in shambles as well. Lewis's grim legacy is loose. This is no longer a rebellion."

Izabella shook her head, her jewel-like eyes burning with an unmistakable fury as she laid out the horrible truth.

"Alice Carroll's only goal is to destroy the world."



There was a truth Elisabeth knew—a truth that Kaito Sena himself was living proof of.

The "conception" possessed by those who met cruel deaths could form the basis for limitless magical growth. But what if there wasn't anything that the person in question wanted to accomplish? A hollow vessel had the power to change its shape at will.

It was impossible to tell what it would give the world and what it would do.

Would it love or would it hate?

Would it be just or would it be evil?

Lewis failed to see the implication...failed to notice the danger. As did Alice herself, for that matter. "This time, I'm going to accomplish everything I set out to do." Nobody even considered what would become of the script if that "everything" took a turn for the worse.

Lewis's story of repentance, dreams, and hatred had laid the foundation. Once he was done atoning for all the people he hadn't been able to save, he

dreamed of creating a perfect utopia. Just as Vlad pointed out, though, that dream was based on lies and self-deception. And on top of that, Alice was terribly young, and in the end, the innocence of her youth let her see through Lewis's smoke and mirrors. She had, in the truest sense of the word, inherited his hatred.

Now she was trying to grant his most fervent wish. Love, hate, justice, and evil had nothing to do with it.

Her sole aim was for everyone to die.

That was all.

And nothing more.

Alice Carroll had broken beyond repair.

Nobody could put her together again.

All this was happening because Lewis had been killed. But that wasn't the whole story. The mixed-race people being killed had started it as well, as had Alice's—that was, Sara Yuuki's—brutal death.

By now, they were all avengers. Everyone hated everyone.

And the world kept on turning, just as properly as ever.

And in that moment, a thought crossed Elisabeth's mind.

A thought she couldn't afford to harbor.

"...Why should Kaito have to—?"

"Elisabeth."

Then, out of nowhere, she heard Kaito Sena's voice.

It was the voice of one who had died to save the world.

And it was a voice of one she adored dearly.



"Please, never come to loathe this world again. No matter what happens, never internalize sin again. You and I worked together and protected this world. Please, never think it's not worth saving."

“.....!”

It was like he had read Elisabeth’s mind. She gasped.

She was a hair’s breadth from barking out an angry reply, but she stopped herself. Kaito Sena wasn’t the one who’d said that.

The words were his, but they were coming from the mouth of another.

The speaker’s gaze was gentle, and Elisabeth saw herself reflected in the woman’s ashen eyes.

The Torture Princess sighed, then posed a question to the Saint. “That’s his message, then?”

“It is. However, there’s more. And if anything, the continuation is the most important part...but it would be best delivered after the current situation is dealt with. If this goes on, many will perish. It’s an act of blasphemy against the world for me to be concerned about that, I know. But the necessity remains.”

“Aye... ’Tis imperative those fixed batteries be destroyed.”

Elisabeth shook her head, then clapped her cheeks to fire herself up. The Saint replied with a small nod, clutching at her tattered cloak as she turned her focus to the batteries. Elisabeth followed her gaze.

The fixed batteries were lethally impeding their ability to fight Alice, and the reincarnators were beyond saving. Granting them a swift death was their best recourse. However, Elisabeth knew it wouldn’t be that simple.

A young girl stood smiling before the batteries.

It was Alice Carroll. The Fremd Torturchen.

If they wanted to make it easier to kill her, they needed to get past her first. A contradiction among contradictions. However, this was no time to be holding back. Elisabeth snapped her fingers with a bellow.

“Splendid Executioner: The Boondock Saints!”

“Oh my, it’s so sparkly!”

Alice’s reaction was as innocent as could be. She held her hands up over her head, and a light flashed from between her fingers.

Slabs of metal tumbled one after another from the eddy of darkness and crimson flower petals, each a massive blade designed to assemble into a grand executioner. As the metal purposefully wove itself together, it headed for the fixed batteries and obliterated them—or rather, it tried to. However, the parts were struck before they could fall into place, and the hard metal shattered in midair.

The pieces shifted back into crimson flower petals and splayed out like splashes of blood. But it wasn't a bombardment that had felled them.

It was a *lance strike*.

"My White Knight."

Before Elisabeth's eyes, Alice was sitting astride a knight's horse. She was the very image of a fairy-tale princess.

The knight guarding his young liege was picturesque as well, clad as he was in his pure-white armor. He glared down at everything that entered his gaze as he raised his helmet's visor. There was no emotion in his eyes, but his features bore a striking resemblance to the human half of Lewis's face. It had taken but a single strike from his lance to shatter the Executioner before it could finish forming.

Alice chuckled. "Say, did you know? In the strange, strange world of *Through the Looking-Glass*, the White Knight is the only one who fights for Alice's sake from the very beginning. I would've liked for Father to get a chance to read Alice's wondrous stories. But now he can't. And he never will."

Midway through, her voice took on a cold harshness. She stopped swaying her legs back and forth.

As though reacting to his master's displeasure, the White Knight raised his lance aloft. Elisabeth immediately sensed the danger she was in. She mentally splayed out her hand, and the Torture Princess selected the appropriate card.

"La Guillotine, Saint of Beheadings!"

"And that's why it's time for me to get serious," Alice declared with a vacant look in her eyes.

Elisabeth cast her spell.

Six black-and-crimson swirls materialized in front of the Saint's briar wall. At the moment, that was the most Elisabeth was capable of deploying at once. A white doll burst out from each of them and landed heavy on the ground. They were white maidens, each made to embody the holiest of saints. Upon seeing them, the bona fide Saint narrowed her ashen eyes a smidgen.

Before her, the maidens raised their heads. Their straight-cut silver hair swayed briskly.

Without a moment's delay, Elisabeth clicked her heels.

The maidens crossed their pale arms atop their chests, then spread them wide. Rectangular blades shot loudly from their elbows.

The Knight gave his lance a mighty swing, and a fierce shock wave slammed into the blades. The first pair shattered, the second pair split, the third pair burst, the fourth pair split, and the fifth pair twisted. Only the sixth pair made it to Alice.

"Too bad, so sad."

Alice smiled and gave the blades a little poke. They crumbled into chunks, spilling down atop Alice's knees and bursting into crimson petals as they landed on her blue dress's skirt.

Meanwhile, La Guillotines fell victim to the lance's aftershock as well. Their heads came off, their torsos contorted, and their limbs were shredded to ribbons. The maidens collapsed. Elisabeth fought to quell her panic, then let out a low murmur. "No match, huh? I see she's been eating well."

This was no longer the same Alice Carroll as before.

No more was she Alice, Lewis's beloved daughter.

What was she, then? She was nothing and no one.

Alice's white hair bobbed as she recited lines as though to introduce herself. "*Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch! ...* Hee-hee, just kidding."

She blinked her red eyes and smiled. A thought crossed Elisabeth's mind.

What was Alice now? If she were forced to do the impossible and define her...

...then 'twould be "something that ought not to exist in this world."

This was the result of an alien reincarnator having fulfilled a narrow set of conditions.

She may not have been on Kaito Sena's level, but all the same, the world wasn't built to contain one such as she.



The Saint's voice was dispassionate and barely louder than a whisper. "Well, this is a problem. The longer we remain at this standstill, the more people will perish, and the worse the situation will become." There was no sign of fear in her gaze, but her gray eyes wavered ever so slightly.

Elisabeth nodded in agreement. The destruction was spreading, and Alice was only going to amass more mana as she claimed more victims. At the moment, though, the biggest problem was their current position.

The thing was, they were standing before the temporary royal castle. It was the most strategically important location humanity had.

The saints' greatest forces—La Mules, La Christoph—are already dead. And Vlad is no more. That leaves me, Izabella...and Jeanne de Rais, who's doubtless observing from some vantage point. If the three of us fall...mankind will be left without a path to victory.

Elisabeth furrowed her brow as she thought. They had countless pieces at their disposal, but only a few assets with any real strength to them. The vast majority of their pieces were all but useless. It was the same reason why Kaito Sena had had to become the Mad King, way back when.

Elisabeth could tell by that point, the plan to apprehend Alice and forcibly transfer Diablo to her was a pipe dream. The situation as it stood was that if they failed to kill her here and now, and instead fell in the process, humanity would not survive.

Then there was the matter of those who felt the need to move about freely despite their complete and utter uselessness.

“Lady Saint! We never expected to find Your Holiness in a place like this!”

“What are you all doing out here?!” Izabella barked at the paladins. “Get back underground and protect the king!”

“But—!”

Despite her sharp rebuke, that was one order they were loath to follow, even coming from their esteemed commander.

The small group had successfully made their way to the Saint unharmed. In all likelihood, Alice had spared them because she found them amusing. “But we have to help the Saint!” they argued back at Izabella.

All emotion vanished from the Saint’s ashen eyes, and she responded to their pleas in a voice void of warmth. “Did you people not hear of my loathing? I never loved you, and even now your faith is nothing more than a nuisance to me. Nearly all the tales your Church shared of me were rooted in mistakes and errors. Yet you say you love me still, knowing that love to be folly? Are you people truly that incorrigible?”

“Absolutely!”

The Saint’s cynical, reproachful question was met with a resolute reply. Her mouth hung half-open in exasperation. However, the paladins were undeterred. They puffed up their chests in simple pride.

“We know full well how many lies there were, and the Church’s influence is nothing compared to its splendid days of yore. But even so, you were the one who made the world. That means that everything good in it came about because of you. What cause do we have, then, to lose our respect for you?! Our hearts are unchanging, Your Holiness! The Church may have been *incorrect*, but it was never *errant*. So, as such!”

They thumped their large shields against the ground in succession. The shields were finely crafted, with blessings from priests carved into their very surfaces, and they offered a high degree of protection against dark magic. Sadly, though, against Alice, they might as well have been made of paper.

However, they positioned themselves in front of the Saint in an attempt to defend her all the same.

The fools went on.

“We paladins believe in your suffering! You may have once hated us, but you still shouldered pain on behalf of ignorant wretches like us. That truth is noble in and of itself.”

“Ah... True enough.”

The Saint bit her lip and clenched her fists. A sort of difficult-to-describe passion crossed her expression for the first time.

Elisabeth was well aware of the anguish the Saint had been through.

Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. And that was the way things ought to be. But was that ignorance not truly a sin?

That fact—that *hatred*—had been an obsession for the Saint. Now her entire body was trembling.

Alice, who’d been watching everything play out, called over to them.

“Are you done with story time now? In that case, I think it’s time for everyone’s insides to become outsides!”

Alice rested her cheek softly against the Knight’s back, and the Knight responded by raising his lance up high.

Then he pointed it at the paladins.

“If any deserve to have stones cast at them, if any deserve to be whipped, it is I.”

The Saint stepped forward.

She moved as calmly as if she were walking on water,

and as she did, she began shedding tears of blood from one eye.



It’s time for a story.

A tale from long, long ago.

Once upon a time, a preeminent genius was born in a world where war waged without end. Once she grew up, she realized that the cycle of violence and

hatred was fruitless. Humanity, beastfolk, and demi-humans were all equal. Every living creature was ignorant, and every living creature was like a stupid animal.

That was why *she had to save them*.

After steadying her resolve to bring about salvation, she got to work. But she screwed up the method about as badly as she could have.

And so, with a *pop*

the world broke.

Because of that, she had to carry out an atonement. But at the same time, she found herself struck by a particular question.

She had tried to save the world. Yet for the rest of eternity, no one would ever consider what she had truly felt. They would hear only what they wanted to hear, see only what they wanted to see. Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid.

That was the way things ought to be. But at the end of the day, was that not truly a sin?

Was it?

Truly?



“You were absolutely right, Mad King. All living creatures are nothing more than ignorant, stupid animals. And that’s what makes them worth protecting. Despite their ignorance, there is good in them. Our present situation was brought about by a confluence of all sins, mine included. Yet even so, nobody has the right to cast all people as sinners and judge them all as deserving of death.”

As the Saint spoke, her briars spread outward like a wave. Ivy rose up to block the lance strike. However, over half of it ended up getting sliced to bits. The shredded briar scattered. Then roses began blooming from the torn cross sections.

A wave of azure and crimson gently swallowed up the lance’s shock wave, and

thousands of petals went dancing brilliantly through the air.

However, that came with a price. The briars coiled themselves tight around the Saint, and blood gushed from her slender frame.

The paladins let out cries bordering on screams. They called over to her in a panic.

“Lady Saint! Lady Saint, your body!”

The Saint offered no reply to their worried shouts. She just silently held her ground and watched carefully for when the next blast would come. Then, drenched in violent red as she was, she spoke with great deliberation.

“I have spent a long time thinking about atonement. It consumed my thoughts, day in and day out—as did what the Mad King said to me.”

As the lance strike vanished, Elisabeth leaped into action.

At the moment, it was essential she buy time. She let out a small murmur.

“Honey Candy.”

Honey began streaming down Alice’s neck. Lilies had manifested in the air, and the golden liquid was spilling out from them.

Next, a swarm of ants climbed up the glistening wave. They started gnawing on the honey and the arteries that sat beneath it.

“Ack! What’s going on?! This is nasty!”

Based on Alice’s screams, it would seem she was still vulnerable to physiological disgust. The plan was absurd, but it had worked nonetheless.

Meanwhile, the Saint unraveled her briars for a time. She collapsed backward, like the strings holding her up had just been cut. The paladins rushed over to her. However, Izabella got to her first and propped up the Saint’s gaunt back as she spoke. “Lady Saint, please don’t do anything rash. If you hold still, I can get you healed—”

“‘You just chose to be alone, that’s all.’ That’s what he said to me. And he was right.”

The Saint didn’t respond to her offer. Izabella said nothing to that, instead

choosing to quickly cast some basic healing magic on her.

As she did, the Saint continued her vacant murmuring. It was like she was giving a confession.

“I went on a journey, and I saw that with my own eyes. Trade was bustling; the child did his job well. There were many who recognized this tattered cloak. He was called Butcher, he was loved, and he lived a good life, yet he never abandoned his task or forsook me. How, then, am I to repay him after I abandoned him so?”

Elisabeth bit her lip. As she’d suspected, the Saint’s outfit and its resemblance to the Butcher’s had been an intentional choice on her part. Now, at long last, the Saint realized what it was she had lost. However, Elisabeth could think of nothing to say to her. The Butcher was dead.

Regretting that now was an act of gross arrogance. Death closed all doors.

Nothing she did would ever be able to reach him.

Then the sound of burning fire filled their ears. It was accompanied by an adorable singsong voice.

“Goodness me, it’s hot. Or should I say that it hurts, I wonder?”

Elisabeth’s eyes went wide. Of all the ways Alice could have dealt with the ants, she had chosen to light herself on fire.

The flames consumed her white hair, charring her skin as it bubbled and burst. Elisabeth surreptitiously shot a volley of stakes at her, but those went up in flames as well. However, all of Alice’s burns healed right up.

A moment later, her auto-immolated skin was as pristine and unscarred as if nothing had happened.

Izabella, somewhat shocked by the rapid back-and-forth, let out a whisper.

“Madam Elisabeth, would you be able to make another opening? She appears to still have some human sensation left in her. I was able to cut her arm, so if Jeanne and I aim for her neck this time—”

“Best not. Even if you lopped her head clean off, she would merely sew it back on. Gouging out her heart might get us somewhere, but anything short of that,

even piercing it through, would be as useless as beheading her. Her regenerative capabilities are unfathomable—much as Kaito’s were at the end, when he reached the point of no longer needing a heart.”

“Then what would you suggest? I find it difficult to imagine us ever finding an opening *that* big,” Izabella replied in consternation.

Elisabeth focused her crimson gaze on Alice’s innocent figure.

As she tried to gauge Alice’s mana reserves and current capabilities, she thought through her options.

Bull of Phalaris, Pied Piper of Hamelin... No, it’s no use. It would take her little effort to overcome whatever I threw at her, even with ostentatious techniques such as those. The time they would buy isn’t worth the mana they would cost me. But this chance we have now... We may not get another...

Unlike Kaito Sena, Alice was still ostensibly mortal. All they needed to do was outpace her incredible regeneration, and that would be that. However, Elisabeth had no idea how they were supposed to accomplish that. Alice’s current strength was second only to the Mad King’s.

Amid that air of frigid tension, the Saint moved once more. She pushed Izabella back and rose unsteadily to her feet. Then she spread her arms out and, without hesitation, stepped forward.

“Shouldering everything is a sad, lonely lot. And thus—”

A *trio* of lances struck her briars.

Even more blood gushed from the Saint’s body. The paladins cried out again, shouting “Lady Saint!” like children calling out for their mother. A few of them even rushed forward, upon which the Saint grabbed them with her vines and dragged them back.

That was when Elisabeth realized that the Saint’s feet were no longer touching the ground. The briars were wound tighter around her than ever before, and their vines were holding her up and anchoring her in the air.

It was like looking at a crucifixion.

The Saint went on, her voice practically a hymn.

“—I will act on behalf of that which I hated, that which I discarded, that which I tried to destroy—and that which the child loved.”

Blood trickled down through her messy black hair. She didn't scream or cry, and there was nothing reflected in her ashen eyes but void. She stared forward, searching for someone that was no longer there.

And in that moment, though she didn't know why,

Elisabeth found herself reminded of some very sad words.



Through her tears, she spoke. “Thank you for being born unto me,” she said.

That was all. And that was enough.

I had fun.

Madam Elisabeth, Mr. Dim-Witted Servant, Ms. Lovely Maid, really, truly, and deeply.

And finally, thank you so much for your many years of patronage.

Elisabeth felt as though she saw a cloak-clad figure waving off in the distance.

She shouted at the top of her lungs.

“This isn't the way, Saint! The Butcher would never have wanted you to sacrifice yourself in atonement!”

“I imagine you're right. That's why I'm not doing this as the Saint. This is *my* story.”

By then the Saint was already high in the air. Red drops dripped from her feet.

The paladins let out voiceless screams. They dropped—practically crumpled—to their knees and began fervently praying. The only one who remained standing was Izabella, who clenched her fists tight like she was forcing herself to endure.

The Saint didn't mock the paladins for their incorrigible display.

She simply spoke, there at the center of their prayers, as a single, lone individual.

“This is my tale of repentance, dreams, and hatred.”

Determination’s light glowed in her expression, and a hitherto unseen strength peeked out from her red eyes.

Elisabeth realized something as she saw her face.

Long ago, when a solitary genius destroyed the world, atoned, and hated, she probably wore the exact same expression.

“Let me tell you something about me, Elisabeth. I was powerless to do anything. Yet for the longest, longest time, I only wanted one single thing—I wanted to protect the world. I can’t believe it took me so long to remember, but...I once...had a dream.”

Droplets of blood, too many of them to count, rained down from her body.

A change began taking place in the ground. Briars began growing from the bloodstains, like the earth itself had just received mana from the heavens. They grew at a shocking rate, faster than they ever had before. Roses bloomed all over. Petals fell from the sky, painting a pattern of azure and crimson roses onto everything they touched. The wind carried them, and the magic propagated.

After spreading outward without end, they began glowing.

The lines spread all across the Capital, and at the center of them all, Alice’s childish face contorted. “What is this? Why, I don’t even know. I can’t decipher the pattern, no matter how hard I look. What’s...going on?”

“My technical command is still unparalleled, if nothing else. I lost most of my mana when I transferred God and Diablo out of my body. I suppose I only have myself to blame. Now I find myself in a state where I can be forced to yield in the face of overwhelming violence. For now, though, I ask that you accompany me, O ye who would replace me as the enemy of the world,” the Saint intoned.

The cold, rational part of Elisabeth finally realized something—there was no need to actually stop her.

During the battle, the Saint had determined that she couldn’t hold out for long, and so she’d made her choice. And part of that choice had involved using

a once-in-a-lifetime technique to draw the largest teleportation circle anyone had ever seen.

Roses rained down from the heavens, and countless petals danced through the air in celebration. It made for an extravagant, gorgeous sight.

It was like they were trying to paint a beautiful painting atop a canvas with nothing on it.

Their painting had nothing but beauty,

but oh, how beautiful it was.

“What was your real name, Saint?!”

Seized by impulse, Elisabeth shouted. This was her last chance. She needed to know. Just as the Mad King was Kaito Sena, so too must she have had a name. Whether or not ignorance was a sin, it was certainly at least sad. Elisabeth couldn't let things end without anyone having ever heard it.

A look of mute shock crossed the Saint's face. A few seconds later, her expression softened for the first time.

And then

she merely shook her head.

She murmured gently.

“I never gave *him* a name.”

And so it’s fine.

This is right.

“What could possibly be right about that?!” Elisabeth screamed.

Long ago, Kaito Sena had once expressed a similar sentiment about the Butcher’s decision. However, the Saint stubbornly refused to give them her name. She only opened her mouth a single time more.

And from her soft lips,
the True Message came.

Elisabeth’s eyes went wide. However, she didn’t have time to reply.

The petals’ dance grew into a storm, and the light flashed. It wasn’t just in the plaza there—everyone attacking the Capital got sucked in. The Saint’s smile faded from view, as did the tears running down her cheeks.

She was losing the last vestiges of her human expression.

And there, at the very end,
she murmured as though she could hear something.

“You’re right... I had fun, too... And so...”

Thank you so much
for being born unto me.
And as she spoke to the empty air,
the Saint vanished and took Alice with her.
To fight on her own,
and to die alone.



“That didn’t...just happen, right? Lady Saint... Lady Saint!”

“We just bore witness to a miracle. For what would you call that, if not a miracle?!”

The various paladins’ shouts echoed through the space where their foe no longer was. As they clamored, they stared straight ahead. Alice and the fixed batteries were still alive. The Saint was going to die by their hands.

That was a certainty.

However, that meant that the Capital—and the world—would survive for that much longer.

On top of that, the scene before them was well deserving of being called a miracle.

It wasn’t clear how it worked, but even now that the light had died out, the briars still remained. Their vines were wound in intricate patterns, and they stretched into the sky in the shape of a cross. And what’s more, the entire sublime fixture was still covered in azure and crimson flower petals.

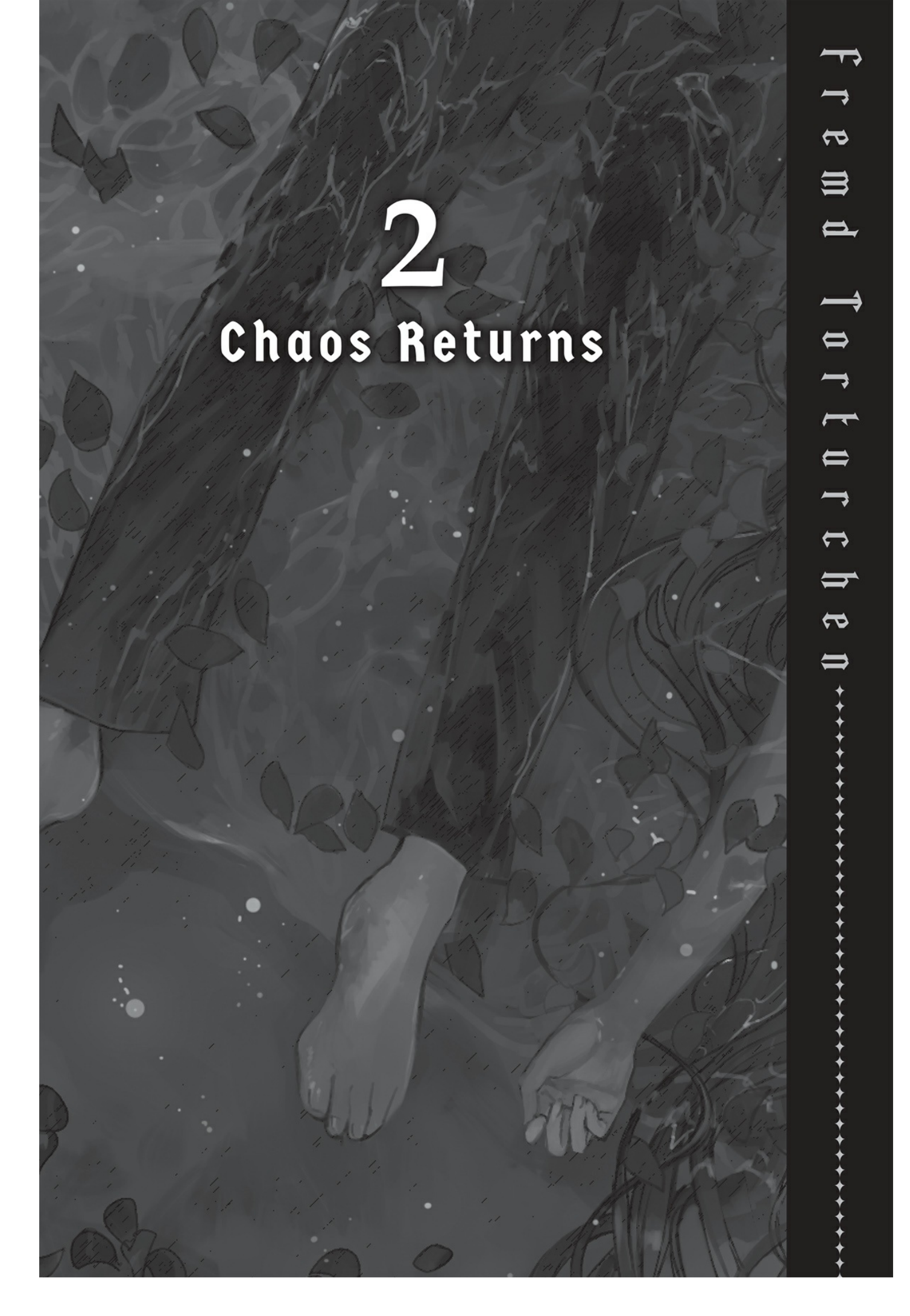
Each time the wind blew, it filled the air with a dancing cloud of colors.

As the petals landed among her raven locks, Elisabeth had a thought.

True enough. This is a miracle.

In the end, the sinner who tried to save the world,
that solitary genius, powerless to do anything,

had brought about the impossible.



2

Chaos Returns

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

2

Chaos Returns

Long ago, the Saint thought once more in that blank, white world.

Why had she tried to save them all?

Given how things had turned out, it couldn't be described as anything other than a flight of fancy driven by a serious case of arrogance and conceit. A fatal mistake, one brought about by the sense of omnipotence that accompanied the possession of great power. Yet in her heart of hearts, she couldn't bring herself to consider what she had tried to do as worthy of scorn or rebuke.

It had been clear as day that if she hadn't done anything, the world would have fallen into ruin.

And it was just as evident that, even knowing that fact, nobody else had tried to act.

That was why she had fought on her own for so long.

To save them all.

However, she had been assailed by profound regrets.

After all, what had she been left with after salvation had been carried out?

In the end, what of hers, what of anyone's had she been able to save?

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Just like when she was young, she hadn't been able to save anything.

But this, this now—this was different.

It was an inelegant conclusion, to be sure. And it had come far too late. People might well point fingers and laugh at her.

But that was fine.

She had finally regained that which she had forgotten.

And she had managed to salvage one thing from that long, long suffering and those many, many failures.

She had protected that which the child she abandoned loved.

In the end, perhaps she merely wanted someone to say it to her. Perhaps she wanted to think it about herself.

Thank you so much for being born.

At long last, the solitary genius realized that,

and in doing so, the Saint finished carrying her burden.

That, and that alone,

was enough to give meaning to her entire tragedy—her entire farce.

“And I lived happily ever after.”



A new miracle had taken place, and the Capital was saved. However, things were far from over.

All those who hadn't borne witness wanted to know the truth.

What had just happened exactly?

And just what kind of peril was confronting the world?

It was imperative that they explain the events to the young king Maclaeus Filliana. Powerful people were going to come to him looking for answers. The Church, in particular, was going to be abuzz like a poked beehive.

It made sense, after all. The Saint had sacrificed herself and gone willingly to her death. It wasn't hard to imagine how people would react to something like that.

Elisabeth knew all that, but she chose to neglect her reporting duties regardless.

The Saint may have completely stopped her in her tracks, but the time that

buys us is limited. 'Twould make for a fine joke if I were to spend that time all tied up alongside Izabella.

The Saint had turned her life into a precious hourglass. There were a million things they needed to do while the Saint held Alice at bay at their teleportation destination, and their sand was running out.

Elisabeth started out by having Izabella give her info on all the towns and villages she'd gotten distress calls from.

Then she left the plaza, which was still astir regarding the miracle, and put down the remaining demon grandchildren and fixed batteries as fast as she could. With their foes in disarray, now was their best chance to thin their ranks and cut off the accumulation of pain at the source.

As she did, she sent out a message.

I presume the Saint is fighting Alice and her company at the spot where she herself was sealed away—the abyss in the World's End. The question becomes, then, how should we—how can we—spend this time she's bought us?

Elisabeth looked at the ceiling as she sank into thought. It was adorned with living flowers.

After teleporting and teleporting and teleporting some more, she had ultimately made her way to a darkened manor.

Its long hallways were coated in a thin layer of dust. She leaned clandestinely against the white wall.

Then she silently watched the flowers daintily sway as she waited for her message's recipients to reply. Suddenly, though, she heard a laugh that sounded almost human boom from close by.

She cast her gaze in the corresponding direction, then scoffed as she spotted a particularly dense patch of darkness.

"Hello, Kaiser. And what exactly have you been doing all this time? Lazing about, no doubt."

"What an insolent tongue you have, foolish child. Would you like me to make offal of it? Perhaps I should just crush your skull between my jaws," the Kaiser

replied.

He revealed himself from the darkness and melted into view. He was a black dog the size of a small cow, and he flashed his jagged fangs. Elisabeth, wholly undaunted, just gave him another scoff.

“Ha. If you wish to try me, then by all means, do so. Unlike your former contractor Kaito, you’ll find me a good deal harder to gobble down—as you’re well aware. Now, I ask you again. What is it you’ve been doing?”

“The stage wasn’t suitable for me, is all. A more fitting moment is yet to come. So to kill time, I was simply watching people suffer. You know, like going out to watch a show.”

Geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, fu-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh, geh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh.

The Kaiser laughed, his voice shrill and cacophonous. Elisabeth shrugged.

In truth, her comments had been toothless.

She knew full well that the Kaiser’s presence wouldn’t have been enough to tip the scales. He could have forced Alice into a war of attrition like the Saint did, and perhaps he would have done an even better job than she had. However, it was as he said. Doing so would have taken him off the board for good.

And besides, no mere human could give orders to the Kaiser and expect him to follow them anyhow.

As yet, ’tis still unclear who his contractor is, and his aims are just as opaque.

Elisabeth stared intently at the Kaiser’s sable frame. She was on the verge of asking him the answers to those questions, but he spoke first, cutting her off as though to say he couldn’t be bothered explaining himself.

“I have a question for you, foolish child.”

“And what might that be? I must say, I never took you for the inquisitive type.”

“It’s true. I’m not, by nature, but something about the situation piqued my curiosity.”

The black dog slapped the ground lightly with his sleek tail.

The hellfire in his eyes flickered. Looking at him, he seemed like one who had transcended mortal understanding, yet the words the supreme hound spoke next had a shockingly human feel to them.

“The Accumulation of Seventeen Years’ Pain and the Saint both said some nonsense about this place being worth protecting. But this whole situation was caused by the discrepancies, oppression, and sorrow brought about by the living themselves. Even if you succeed in protecting the world, the grudges caused by those wounds will still fester. Destruction will continue to lurk just around the corner. Knowing that, do you truly believe that enough righteous ones will be born to overturn all that?”

“Nay. Not in the slightest,” Elisabeth declared without missing a beat.

The Kaiser squinted at her in surprise. In Elisabeth’s eyes, though, it was the only answer she could have given. The Saint may have been naive, but not her.

No, the Torture Princess knew. She knew that ignorance *was* a sin. She knew that the weak could commit horrendous acts without batting an eye. And she knew that even if they succeeded in saving the world, that as long as God and Diablo existed, it could fall back into ruin at a moment’s notice.

Yet even so...

She went on, dignified and true. “But I leave it in their hands regardless. As a sinner, I’m hardly in any place to lay bare the wickedness of the living and write them off as being fit solely for the grave. I’ve an obligation to keep the thread together, that others may yet try spinning it.”

Elisabeth had long since found her resolve, and it was still just as unwavering.

Those who owe their lives to another have a duty to fight.

Watching the Saint make her choice had made Elisabeth sure of that. She didn’t have time to waste falling into despair over everything that was wrong and broken.

She owed her life to Kaito Sena.

His love had saved her.

That meant that all of this, everything that was happening and everything that was going to happen, was her story.

Averting her eyes and passing the buck wasn't an option.

"'Twas my choice to make, and I chose to see this fight through to its end."

"Hmph. Playing the part of the peerless dunce, I see. Well, so be it. Will you be able to emulate that fool whose twisted mind remained clear to the end? Or will you drown in your hypocrisy and die? I look forward to... Hmm? Ah, they're here. Well, I have no patience for squeaky little mice."

With that, the Kaiser vanished. Elisabeth, now alone again, looked up.

She had told them that a message alone would suffice, but in spite of that, a teleportation circle was etching itself onto the ground before her eyes.

It wasn't quite the same as the sort humans employed. Fire ran across it first, after which a cloud of red and white sand swirled up from its center. The two hues filled her view like a sand painting. Eventually, they hardened into a wall, cracked, and crumbled.

When they did, a dozen-odd beastfolk stood before her.

The copper-furred wolf standing at their center looked up. He gave her a courteous bow.

"Captain Elisabeth, the entire Peace Brigade is reporting for duty!"

They were Elisabeth's soldiers,

her subordinates from the land of the beastfolk.



"I appreciate you coming all the way out to this fateful manor," Elisabeth said. "As I suspected, the place is deserted. 'Tis the perfect spot for a clandestine meeting."

The beastfolk nodded.

Asking them to come there of all places was in poor taste, to be sure, but given that she had a proper reason, none of them voiced any complaints.

Elisabeth stepped forward from the wall she'd been leaning against. In truth,

it was no wall at all. It was the entrance to a room, packed tight with pale-silver ivy. The vines were cold, firm, and soft, like a corpse that was just coming out of rigor mortis. It reminded her of a graveyard. And that was exactly what it was.

They were in Vyade Ula Forstlast's primary residence.

And they were standing before the throne room—the room she'd died in.

After her self-inflicted death, Alice and Lewis made their escape by destroying a nearby wall. However, the room's actual entrance was pristine and untouched.

That was where Elisabeth had awaited Lute's response. However, he and the rest of her men had foregone the use of a communication device and chosen to answer in person. Even though she'd conveyed her location to them, this was a turn of events she hadn't foreseen.

Knowing what it likely implied, Elisabeth broke the ice.

She repeated the questions she had asked them in her missive.

"How fares the situation in the beastfolk lands? How is Vyadryavka? What states are the Three Kings of the Forest in?"

After Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast's appeal to the Three Kings and their march on the hidden demi-human pureblood village, the Sand Queen's awakening had dealt the beastfolk a harsh blow. Elisabeth didn't have a great picture of how things had gone down for them after that.

Her soldiers exchanged looks with each other. Then three representatives from their ranks—one with a fox head, one with a dog head, and one with a bull head—stood at attention side by side.

The three of them answered her questions.

"To be blunt, Captain, the situation isn't pretty. The surviving members of the imperial family are divided, and the people's spirits are wearing thin. And Lord Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast is in similar straits. The Three Kings of the Forest made their choice, so there were initially talks about letting him off the hook, but now..."

"For now, he's being monitored and held under temporary house arrest. It's

hard for us to say what will become of him.”

“As for the Three Kings of the Forest, they’ve suffered grievous wounds and are having difficulty even moving. There are many who fear the Sand Queen will strike again, and it’s given rise to a level of unrest our nation has never seen. There are some who want us to go on the offensive so we can avenge the Three Kings of the Forest, and others who even want us to offer the demi-humans our unconditional surrender.”

“Not even the honorable beastfolk are immune, then? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, but...all that would accomplish is to delay their inevitable ruin.”

Elisabeth sighed. There was a faint glimmer of grief in her eyes.

No matter the nation, the masses were always like a single sprawling ruler.

The things they thought and said had profound effects on the rest of the board. For how could they not? And the thing that always shook them most was their fear of death.

Nobody wanted to die.

And sometimes, that meant they were willing to sacrifice anything.

The situation was just as unstable as she’d feared. Her sheep-headed subordinate was the next to speak up, his voice restless. “We serve the Torture Princess, Madam Elisabeth Le Fanu. We’re not ashamed of that. However, the members of Lady Valisisa Ula Forstlast’s private army have been asking a lot of questions about the immoderate support we’ve been giving mankind and the search we conducted for Satisbarina’s son. Up until now, we’ve been standing fast at the World Tree to defend the Three Kings of the Forest, but when you sent your message, we came as fast as we could. Captain...what do you think’s going to become of the beastfolk? What will become of the world?”

“On that front, I have news both good and bad.”

Elisabeth raised two fingers.

She had no intention of letting the question linger, so she went ahead and revealed both pieces of information without giving her men so much as time to brace themselves.

“The situation has changed. Due to the Fremd Torturchen Alice Carroll awakening and going on a rampage, the world once more finds itself faced with obliteration. On the other hand, in all likelihood, the demi-humans and mixed-race folk are no longer our foes.”

The declarations sent a stir through her subordinates’ ranks. They flashed confused gazes at each other. It was a natural reaction. Just a single day prior, they and the demi-humans and mixed-race folk had been trying to kill each other. And what’s more, Alice had originally been on the mixed-race people’s side. However, Elisabeth was sure of her statement on all counts.

With Lewis dead, Alice feels she has no place to go back to. Her father was the only thing she held any real attachment to. And besides, the mixed-race folk would never have allowed her to use the weapons Lewis crafted in the manner she did. It holds, then, that they never gave her their leave. Yet she’s using them all the same.

There was a story there, and one that Elisabeth suspected involved bloodshed. The Fremd Torturchen had done something to her own allies and given her declaration about it being time for “everyone to die together,” Elisabeth suspected that the first ones she had made sacrifices of were the mixed-race folk themselves. That, and any demi-humans who happened to be present.

A truly pure heart made no exceptions.

Sometimes, innocence could be the most horrifying thing imaginable. Elisabeth went on. “We have to act now, while Alice is out of the picture. We need the Sand Queen on our side. The time for pleasant infighting has passed. By the sound of it, though, the beastfolk are in no state to negotiate. As such...”

Elisabeth paused for a moment. She took a deep breath. Whether or not the deed was possible was yet to be seen. However, an attempt had to be made. And with the Saint gone, the task fell to her replacement.

When Elisabeth continued, she made sure her conviction rang in every word.

“...I shall go and persuade the demi-humans and mixed-race folk.”

A new herald of the end had appeared, and the arrival of a common enemy

made for the perfect opportunity to negotiate a cease-fire.

It was craven, in a sense, and comical to boot,
but that was just how the world worked.



Even in the midst of abject chaos, Elisabeth was still keeping tabs on her foes.

For one, she knew that the mixed-race folk were still using the hidden demi-human village as their base of operations.

It still had the Sand Queen's protection, after all, so there was little need for them to pack up their bags and leave.

After fleeing from their historic rout, the other races had yet to so much as approach the settlement again. That said, Elisabeth knew where it was, so as long as she wasn't afraid of getting attacked the moment she landed, she could still at least get there.

She chose to gamble on them having fallen too deep into disarray to intercept her.

However, nothing could have prepared her for what she found there.

It was an entirely different sort of hell than it had been when she last left.

"How could something like this even happen?"

"Who would have thought that the Sand Queen would—"

The Peace Brigade members' voices were tinged with fear.

Elisabeth had tried to stop them, but they had accompanied her to the desert regardless. Not even her warning that "the battle that lies beyond will transcend mortal comprehension" had been enough to get them to back down. As far as Lute and the others were concerned, the scariest thing of all was the prospect of not being able to help. Now, though, they simply stood in blank shock.

The hidden village was located in the Dragons' Graveyard. It was covered in its entirety in bones, and an overlarge dragon skull had been left to serve as its front gate. At the moment, though, there was a new colossus collapsed in front

of it.

The sloping semicircle its frame formed atop the ground was like looking at a hill made of sand.

Its hardened scales were cracked, exposing the strangely elastic flesh beneath. Dark blood was pooled around it on the sand like oil. It was as though a black circle had been cut directly out of the desert.

Meanwhile, the head was marred by a peculiar-looking scar. It looked like it had been opened wide up, then closed again.

Elisabeth stood motionless before the grisly spectacle. She thought back to the quotes from the poem she'd once looked into.

"A body unheld by death's fell claim." "A radiant form." "A glittering frame."

"Adorned with reddened scales." "Like beautiful stones." "Our eternal protector."

The people loved the Sand Queen. They revered her. And that was why they had made use of her corpse.

They had forced it back into motion, and this was the result of their efforts.

The Sand Queen lay before Elisabeth and her men, now dead twice over.

"Or to be more precise, her magical reactor was destroyed with great precision," Elisabeth amended her thought as she looked at the corpse's chest. It was a mystery what had caused the head wound. Whatever killed the Queen, though, it must have been a single blow. Not even Alice would have survived a protracted clash with her.

Elisabeth shook her sand-battered hair off her shoulders and gave a small nod.

"Lewis was the one who aided the demi-humans in their engineering efforts to analyze the Sand Queen's corpse. Alice would have been with him, so it stands to reason that she would know the Sand Queen's weak spots. If she caught the Queen by surprise, a carefully placed lance strike from that White Knight of hers could well have gotten the job done. That said, the wound on the head is closed up. Did she fail to down the Sand Queen with her initial strike,

then?”

Elisabeth tried approaching the corpse, but she quickly stopped in her tracks. Thousands of little bubbles were floating on the black blood’s surface. She tried popping one with the tip of her toe, and her shoe melted a little. It wasn’t hard to imagine what would have happened if she’d set foot in it.

Lute shook his head, then cautioned her. “Best not to, I think. Even if we got close, the Sand Queen’s body is too much for us to handle.”

“Aye, true enough. Without appropriate tools of some sophistication, we’ve little chance of gleaning anything of note from her.”

Elisabeth frowned as she let out a sigh. The magical devices she was capable of summoning were first-rate, but they only served the purpose of torturing people. And besides, even *understanding* the Sand Queen’s corpse was easier said than done.

She was like the Three Kings of the Forest. No matter how long you looked at her, keeping a coherent mental image of her in her entirety was nigh impossible.

Her springy flesh, her chipped, jewel-like scales, the grim cut across her head, and her claws submerged in the lake of blood were all perfectly comprehensible on their own. However, it was impossible to picture them as a whole. Furthermore, the corpse’s expression was unseeable. It was anyone’s guess as to whether her second rest was a peaceful one. That said, the fact of the matter was that she was dead.

Even pondering such a question was an act of pointless sentimentality.

The question is, what are those who yet remain doing?

With the Sand Queen dead, the hidden village was back to being as good as defenseless. To lose her was to lose their shield and their sword at the same time. Yet despite the emergency it was facing, the settlement was dead quiet.

The horrors within must have been far beyond Elisabeth’s expectations.

However, even realizing that wasn’t enough to shake her. She spoke succinctly. “Let’s go.”

“We’re right there with you, ma’am,” Lute replied.

However, Elisabeth didn’t so much as cast a glance his way before setting off. The decision to follow her or not was theirs to make. She threw the dragon skull’s mouth open.

Then she walked straight forward. Her men wordlessly came along after her.

And with that, they went in.

Into the chaos that awaited them—into Wonderland.



There were corpses.

There were corpses. There were bodies. There were remains. There were carcasses.

There were corpses melted like butter, corpses sprinkled with pepper, corpses seated for a tea party, corpses with their heads cut off, corpses drowned in a sea of tears, corpses packed into buildings, corpses that had fallen off walls.

The sheer number of bodies was almost comical.

Demi-humans and mixed-race people alike had been killed without distinction.

The mixed-race people suffered heavy casualties during the Three Kings’ invasion, but none of those victims had been made into macabre displays like this. By Elisabeth’s estimation, these ones had been picked off soon after their victory.

The desert had no shortage of places where one could cremate and store bodies. However, all of these had simply been left out in the open.

The bodies sat splayed out like they were nothing more than objects. Strangely, though, each one had been offered a tiny display of mercy.

Someone had gone and placed a blue flower atop each and every one of them.

A tiny prayer, perhaps, for the dead.

And that was the scariest part of all.

“It can’t be... Did *any* of them survive?”

Elisabeth shook her head. “I know not. Many fled, I imagine. That said, I’ve yet to find any survivors.”

Lute’s tail curled up. He had known that before even asking, but he simply didn’t want to believe his own eyes.

Alice was acting completely within expectations.

However, that didn’t make what she’d done any less deranged.

The two of them arrived at a section of the settlement that had avoided getting hit by the fire during the Three Kings’ attack. However, everyone they passed was still dead. And it wasn’t just the main residences, either. Even the underground bunkers that the human-beastfolk army missed during the battle had been cracked wide open, and the people who’d fled there for shelter had been butchered as well.

It reminded Elisabeth of her birthplace. Those who lived surrounded by walls made for perfect fodder, and it was in just such a town that Elisabeth had once gorged herself on pain. Although the people here had been given much quicker paths to death, what they’d been subjected to was much the same thing.

It was a sin of the most depraved sort.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth!

Cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

Those old, familiar cries of hatred sounded deep in Elisabeth’s eardrums. Here, though, there was no one to even scream.

At the same time, she was reminded of a woman.

Namely, she was reminded of a lizard-headed noblewoman—Aguina’s wife, Satisbarina Elephabred. When she gave Elisabeth the settlement’s location, she made Elisabeth make her a promise.

Elisabeth could still remember exactly what she’d said to her.

“Those who boast of knowing love cannot well make light of the love of others. Such is the oath I demand of you.” “When you find my son and his wife, I

ask that you vow not to forsake them.” “I cannot...will not allow harm to come to them.”

How would she lament if she saw this grim spectacle, I wonder?

Elisabeth shook her head. A slight shadow came over her expression, but speaking as the Torture Princess, the total annihilation here was actually a decent outcome for them. With the Sand Queen gone, there was little value to be found in reconciling with the demi-humans and mixed-race folk. This way, there was one less thing she needed to worry about.

That said, Elisabeth’s instincts were as sharp as a knife, and they were telling her a different story.

Something seems amiss... Can I really write this off so simply?

She cast her crimson gaze downward and sank into thought.

As she did, her dog-headed subordinate with the black-and-white-spotted fur rushed over to her and dutifully remembered to salute.

When he gave his report, his tail was standing on end, and he was clearly trying to suppress the emotion in his voice.

“Captain, we’ve finished checking the temple that was damaged in the battle, and we have good news! It has a sanctuary modeled off the one in the demi-human pureblood sector, and not only did it avoid the fire, its wards kept it intact in its entirety. There are no signs it was ever opened by force. Quick, ma’am, this way!”

“Very well. Let’s go.”

Elisabeth gave him an immediate nod. Her instincts were telling her to follow him, and follow him she did.

The settlement had no palace, so it was the path to the temple instead that was dyed vermilion. Painted atop that hue, there was an intricate array of other vibrant colors. It was an illustrated depiction of the demi-humans’ history.

Her high heels chipped at the paint as her thoughts turned.

Deep inside the demi-human Sand Temple, there was a hexagonal sanctuary adorned with gold and jewels. By the sound of it, the temple here had a similar

space, though they probably enshrined holy relics there instead of the Sand Queen's corpse. Only a scant few demi-humans would have even known how to open it.

The slightest pangs of hope beat in Elisabeth's and the Peace Brigade's chests as they hurried onward.

Would there be survivors inside?

And even if there were, would they be too scared to function?

Elisabeth and the others had no way of knowing. But they hoped all the same.



"Looking at this... Is there not a fair chance that those inside were annihilated as well?"

The moment they got there, Elisabeth immediately feared the worst.

There was a bittersweet smell wafting through the air. Alice had probably gotten bored and given up on destroying the sanctuary, but instead, she had pumped it full of poison. Getting done in by a poison they themselves had developed was an ironic way for the mixed-race people to go. In a way, though, it was also fitting. However, her black-and-white-spotted subordinate shook his head in disagreement.

"There's something unnatural about how the lingering fumes are concentrated. They're thinner in the area around the sanctuary, but that's not the way air is supposed to flow. Someone inside must have taken countermeasures against the poison."

"Ah, I see. Thank you for bringing it up. I lack the olfactory precision to pick up on such details. Shall we open it, then?"

Elisabeth quickened her pace. The sound of their footsteps echoed off what bone pillars remained. There was still no reaction from inside the sanctuary—and that made Elisabeth and the Peace Brigade let down their guards.

A harsh *wham* split the air.

The door to the sanctuary flew open far more violently than it ever would have in peacetime, and someone rushed out like a loosed arrow.

He took the object he was holding and thrust it forward. Elisabeth's wolf-headed subordinate suddenly found something hard and metal in his mouth, and the man followed up by sweeping his legs out from under him. The wolfman did a half spin, and the man planted himself squarely on the wolfman's chest.

The man's movements were skillful, but more than anything, it was his weapon that impressed Elisabeth.

The weapon in question was a rifle.

The demi-humans were masters of metalworking, and they had already developed functional firearms. However, there were still a lot of kinks to work out before they could mass-produce them. At the moment, there were only a small number of prototypes out in the world, and they were owned solely by members of the aristocracy. In short, the comfort with which their new acquaintance was handling his rifle meant that he must have been a big deal, even among the high-grade purebloods.

Elisabeth took another good look at him.

The man was a male demi-human with the head of a lizard, and his slender build, golden eyes, and vermilion scales looked somehow familiar.

Could it be? Is he—?

"Nobody move!" the man shouted. "Not unless you want this guy to die!"

"Randgrof Elephabred! You're alive!"

Elisabeth was about to say his name, but Lute beat her to the punch.

Randgrof Elephabred.

That was Aguina and Satisbarina's son.

If beastfolk faces were difficult to tell apart, demi-humans were nigh impossible. However, it would seem their suspicions were true.

Upon hearing Lute's shout, the man—Randgrof—looked up and frowned in puzzlement.

"Who are you...and why do you know my name? Do we know each other?"

“I can answer that,” Elisabeth replied. “I come at the behest of Satisbarina Elephabred.”

“My mother? Why?”

“She asked that I ensure your safety, and we’ve been searching for you since the Three Kings began their march. Now calm yourself and look around. This place is filled with corpses as far as the eye can see. Who would come to do you harm? Any foes of yours would simply depart and leave you to your lot. Know where it is you stand,” she said coolly.

The provocative wording was a considered choice on her part. Knowing that she was talking to Satisbarina’s son, she judged it would have the desired effect. After showing a quick flash of anger, Randgrof lowered his rifle.

Sure enough, rage was the fastest way to get through to him. He got up off Elisabeth’s subordinate and offered him an apologetic bow. Then, having realized who the group’s leader was, he came over to Elisabeth.

The Torture Princess’s crimson eyes narrowed. Randgrof’s silken clothes were smeared with blood.

Then, with a shudder, Randgrof dropped his gun. He crumpled to his knees. “Thank goodness... Thank goodness you’re here. Please, I’m begging you, you have to come in. This place is sacred to our people. I would normally bar you, but now I welcome you with open arms. That was too close... A little longer, and we’d have...”

“What happened? Pull yourself together. What exactly is going on in there?”

Elisabeth helped Randgrof up. The man was scared stiff. However, Alice had long since left. Whatever it was he was afraid of, it wasn’t her. Randgrof shook his head and continued his desperate plea.

The words came out more as sobs than anything else.

“Any longer and we would’ve started killing each other.”

At that, Elisabeth and her men couldn’t help but exchange some glances.



Despair was a funny thing.

Sometimes, it robbed people of their ability to make rational decisions.

Given the circumstances, though, acting rationally was hardly that important.

The mixed-race people had spent many long months and years plotting their rebellion against the world. They wanted to see their wish through to fruition, even if it meant making foes out of everyone else. However, there was one important fact they overlooked.

The Fremd Torturchen didn't share that fervent desire of theirs.

The only thing she held was a deep-seated affection for the man who called her his daughter. Granted, she was quite fond of her other allies, but therein lay the tragedy. To Alice and Lewis both, those people they held dear were nothing more than people they felt ought to die alongside them. In Alice's eyes, killing the survivors was an act of mercy.

Thus, all it took was a child's grief to shatter the mixed-race people's dearest desire.

Many of them were given the "kindness" of having their lives taken.

But the bigger issue, the problem now at hand was...

...what are those misfortunate enough to survive to do from here?

They'd made enemies of the world, they had no homeland to return to, and if they fled, they would be doing so in disgrace. Their failure was despair-inducing in its totality.

Their rebellion had brought about doom, just not in the way they'd wanted.

They had repented, and they had hated, and now their dream was over.

They had no more reason to live. Even that had been taken from them.

All of that had led them to where they were—in the sanctuary. The mixed-race people were pushing to die by mass suicide, and naturally, the demi-humans were refusing to go quietly. Most of them had been nothing but hostages, and even the traitors among their ranks at least had a homeland that would take them back. They had no reason to play along, and so life and death were being forced to vie for supremacy in a tiny, isolated space.

Whenever that happened, there could only be one outcome.

People would start brutally killing one another.

However, the arrival of their unexpected visitors put a temporary halt to the brewing violence. The Torture Princess followed Randgrof into the tense room, then took advantage of both sides' bewilderment to start haughtily giving out orders.

Beneath the temple, there was a small room for its grave keeper.

It was there that Elisabeth took Randgrof and a representative from the mixed-race people and set up a meeting.

The other survivors were even farther underground, in a stone room surrounding a bed of vitreous sand. It was modeled after the Sand Queen's chamber and was similarly massive. Inside, mixed-race folk were huddled up tight with mixed-race folk, and demi-humans with demi-humans, yet even so, the chamber was packed nearly to capacity.

Elisabeth commented on the head count.

"Three hundred, give or take? I'm surprised to see so many."

"Three hundred hid underground, and around the same number fled," the middle-aged mixed-race man replied. "Take away the demi-humans, and we make up just half that number. And you call us *many*? The ranks for our rebellion against the world have been whittled down to a mere handful. Although, I suppose that's a happy turn of events for you people."

The man had the eyes of a human, the ears of a beastfolk, and the face of a demi-human. His cheeks were stretched taut over deep sword wounds, and he had scars from someone nearly ripping off his face. That alone was enough to get a glimpse at the depths of his despair. In spite of that, though, Elisabeth's reply was blunt. "Unashamedly so, yes. Allow me to be concise. As I see it, there's little reason for me to even negotiate here. However, it'll be one fewer thing for me to have to think about, so I call for a temporary cease-fire. I vow to place your survivors under my protection. In exchange, I ask for information on Lewis's legacy. Furthermore, I ask that you hand us custody of the living demi-humans here."

When Elisabeth listed out her conditions, it earned her dubious looks from not just the mixed-race man, but from Randgrof as well. By the looks of it, he didn't understand why she'd made the request she had about the demi-humans. However, Elisabeth had had a good reason for that.

If she wanted to help deescalate the situation, extending a gesture of goodwill to the demi-humans who'd never turned traitor was a good first step.

Furthermore, and more importantly, there was something weighing on her mind. "Randgrof, I have a question for you. Was your father... Was Aguina off somewhere else?"

"Father? No. After his betrayal, he joined up with the mixed-race folk and came here as well. That's why he left my mother a message...or at least, I hear he did. I actually saw him a few times here myself."

"What became of his corpse, then?"

"...Wait, you haven't seen my father's body?"

Elisabeth gave Randgrof's shocked question a nod.

Randgrof went on with an expression that was somewhere between relief and bewilderment.

"Father didn't escape with us; he continued evacuating purebloods until the very end. I had simply assumed he passed. I was sad about it, surely, but are you telling me he survived?"

"I know not. I find it hard to imagine he did, but then..."

Elisabeth shook her head. It was hard to picture Aguina fleeing the settlement and simply leaving that sea of corpses behind. That said, she couldn't rightly say that she'd seen Aguina Elephabred's corpse.

The death of the man who slew a saint

and could well be described as an enemy of the world was, as yet, unconfirmed.



Elisabeth obviously hadn't gone around to check each and every corpse, but there was something else that she was confident about. If Aguina had been

staring down death, he would have made sure to leave some sort of mark on the world. However, she had seen no such thing.

It begged the question, where did he go?

“In any case, I have my vow with Satisbarina to uphold. You’re coming with us.”

“Ah, um...right. I have to wonder, what exactly did my mother make you promise?”

Randgrof frowned. He probably knew full well just how tough Satisbarina was.

Elisabeth waited for the middle-aged man’s response, but the mixed-race representative persisted in his silence. It was a good ten seconds later that he finally moved. He inclined his head, and, in the same motion, shook it. “You can do what you want with the demi-humans...but I have no information to give you.”

“Interesting. Stubborn to the very end, then?”

“No, it’s simpler than that. I just don’t have anything I *can* tell you. I imagine Lewis already told you about the demon grandchildren, and you saw the fixed batteries for yourself. We have nothing valuable enough to bargain for our lives with. Our ambitions are broken, and our dearest wish lies dashed. This is as far as we go. There’s nothing more to it.”

“What are you saying?” Elisabeth asked.

“Consider yourselves lucky, demi-human. You get to live another day. Now take them and go. But us, our lives end here,” the man said matter-of-factly.

Elisabeth took a moment to stew on what he’d said. He was not speaking out of panicked desperation. He had just calmly made the decision that that was where he was going to die.

She raised an eyebrow and rested her chin on her hands.

“And your people are in consensus on that?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand, but our despair is not something so easily forgotten. ‘Have you ever seen someone who was murdered?’”

It was nonsensical, asking a question like that to the Torture Princess. However, the mixed-race representative went on like a man possessed.

““Someone who was sold off? Someone who was violated? Someone who was robbed of all their dignity? Someone who was cast into despair? Someone who was dissected while they were still alive?””

Have you ever seen someone get sacrificed and have it not weigh on their killers’ consciences in the slightest?

Have you ever seen someone be victimized in the name of justice and faith?

I’ll never forgive them. No matter who does. No matter if God himself does. No matter if even the dead do.

““I’ll never forgive them, even if I’m the only one,”” the old man said, giving voice to his resentment. Elisabeth could tell that the words weren’t his.

That was a speech that someone else had given. The mixed-race man exhaled, then confirmed her suspicions.

“That’s something Lewis said once. We were all following his malice. His hatred called forth the Fremd Torturchen, and we welcomed her gladly. And you can see where it got us. There’s no need for us to ‘slay as many of you as we can until the day of our ultimate defeat’ anymore. The girl’s going to kill everyone anyway. We’re all beyond help. If we went and shook hands with the very people we tried to kill just to eke out a tiny bit more life, what would that make us?”

Elisabeth didn’t respond to that. She simply barked an order. “Lute, go on down.”

Lute understood what she meant. He nodded, then left the room and headed for the stone chamber below.

He directed a forceful shout out into the crowd.

“If any mixed-race people want to leave with us, come this way! You have my word that no harm will come to you!”

The only reply he got was dead silence. Down in the murky darkness, the air was thick with anger and hopelessness.

It told Elisabeth all over again just how deep-seated their hatred of the world was.

Now that their rebellion had failed, they were turning all their destructive cravings inward.

If she were Kaito Sena, Elisabeth mused, this was where she would try to talk them out of it. There was no doubt in her mind that he would have used every argument he could have to try to save the oppressed. That was just the kind of good-natured guy he was.

But the Torture Princess was not him.

Elisabeth casually rose to her feet, then turned around and spoke.

“So be it. If you seek death, then be my guest. I can see I’m unneeded here, so I’ll merely take the demi-humans and be on my way.”

“We’re...saved? But...we’re the *only ones* who got saved...”

Randgrof’s murmur dripped with guilt. However, Elisabeth ignored him.

By nature, the Torture Princess was one who oppressed. She had no capacity to play the saint, and the prospect of her trying to get in good with the wounded was laughable. Elisabeth had no more attention to spare for those who resented the world.

The Torture Princess began walking as she spoke.

“I shan’t denounce your desire to end things. Let this bring a close to your hatred and your dreams.”

Resentment and sorrow and rage, despair and malice and suffering,

for better or for worse, they would all come to an end. In a sense, it was a sort of salvation.

It was sad, no doubt. It could be spoken of as pitiable. But the fact remained that death was a way for things to end. Elisabeth couldn’t deny that, and she knew that speaking of hope when there was none would be nothing more than a base act of deception.

She did, however, give Randgrof a dispassionate instruction.

“Leave them your gun. ’Tis a wretched sight when one tries to end their life by the blade and fails to finish the job.”

“Ah, right, okay. I’ll leave everything we have.”

Randgrof hurriedly acquiesced, gathering up the valuable weapons and piling them in the corner of the room.

The Peace Brigade began taking the demi-humans outside.

Cries of relief began rising up all over, and the middle-aged man made sure to tell the other mixed-race people not to interfere.

Elisabeth cast a single glance their way. Still no reaction. Their appearances were wildly varied, but all of them shared a common rejection of the world that lay ahead. Elisabeth left those who’d chosen death behind and set foot on the staircase.

And that’s when it happened.

A massive *reeeet* rang out

like the world itself was creaking.

The sanctuary started shaking. Chunks of rubble rained down from above. The vitreous sand scraped against itself, making it sound as though someone was screeching. It was as if the end of days had come again. However, it was too early for Alice to be back.

Elisabeth paused, perplexed at what was going on.

Not a moment later, the mixed-race man’s eyes went wide as he realized what was happening. He opened his mouth as wide as it would go, and his ugly scars shifted about as he cackled at the top of his lungs. His laughter echoed about like the cries of some avian portent of doom. “Oh, I see, I see, I see! You would go that far... You would take and grant even that?! Oh, you *adorable girl*! It’s to be death, then, death, death, death! An impartial massacre that casts aside every ideal we held true!”

His voice rang with considerable amusement as he kept on laughing the laugh of a man whose fraying sanity had finally snapped.

As the chaos swelled, Elisabeth thought back.

She thought about the awe-inspiring presence she'd felt that day.

And at the same time, she heard Alice's words repeat in the depths of her memories.

"I didn't move, you know. But despair did."

Her voice had rung with ridicule,
as though mocking those who listened for expecting anything more of the world.



Off in the distance, they could hear a roar they'd heard once before.
Countless voices screamed, yet they were all one and the same.
Die. Die. Die. The time has come. I have found you with my eyes.
The heavens and earth shall be moved, and thou shalt come to judge the world by fire.

This day, day of wrath
calamity and misery
day of great and exceeding bitterness.

This day our master is resurrected.

Randgrof and Lute both moved to protect Elisabeth from the debris, but she shook them off and rushed outside. It was there that she witnessed the series of changes for herself.

A rain of black blood fell, and the toxic droplets melted the sand where they landed. Scales blurred as they healed, like the crystal once had when a pair of arms had extended from it.

Off in the distance, the grand titan—the one who had died, been forced to move again, then died once more—got up.

It was thrice now that the Sand Queen had acted. However, something about this time was different.

Her eyes swiveled, staring off restlessly in every direction.

They were the eyes of one who had lost their mind.

A corpse should have had no mind to lose, and that was enough for Elisabeth to discern what had changed.

That's not the Sand Queen in there!

Upon further reflection, it was odd how half-cocked a job Alice had done of destroying the Sand Queen.

The Sand Queen was a fantastic weapon, but her mana had inherited her maternal nature toward the demi-humans.

That made her a threat to Alice. However, she was still valuable as a tool of mass destruction. Simply killing her would be a waste, and that left two options: destroy her completely...or *change* her.

What had Alice done, then?

The diabolical answer to that question roused itself within Elisabeth's mind. If you wanted to modify a windup doll, all you had to do was bore a little hole, swap out the part you wanted, and fill the hole back up. And that was the exact same thing you did to a golem to implant a soul in it.

The setup they used to make the Sand Queen's corpse move in the first place was similar to the way you would configure a stone golem. It stood to reason that Alice would be able to put a soul inside the Queen's body, and the mixed-race folk she had been working with would have had all the appropriate tools needed to put that idea into practice.

On top of all that, Alice's "whimsical" magic had a troublingly strong affinity for "playing with dolls."

It was a challenging feat, one that any mage from their world would've been hard-pressed to achieve, but Alice had done just that. By inserting a new soul into the Sand Queen's body, she had overwritten the nature of its mana. The rest was simply a matter of time. As soon as the soul became acclimated, the body would begin moving once more. It was unclear when the Sand Queen would break down, but until that moment, its rampage would continue unopposed.

That, then, posed a new question.

Who had Alice used?

Their ego would have been an impediment, so Alice would have made sure to destroy it first, but even so, she'd have wanted to pick someone clever enough to act of their own volition.

Someone capable of becoming an enemy of the world.

Elisabeth stood amid the destroyed houses with her mouth agape.

It was Lute, who had now caught up with her, who bellowed at the figure in the distance.

Perhaps it was his bestial sharpness that had let him realize who it was.

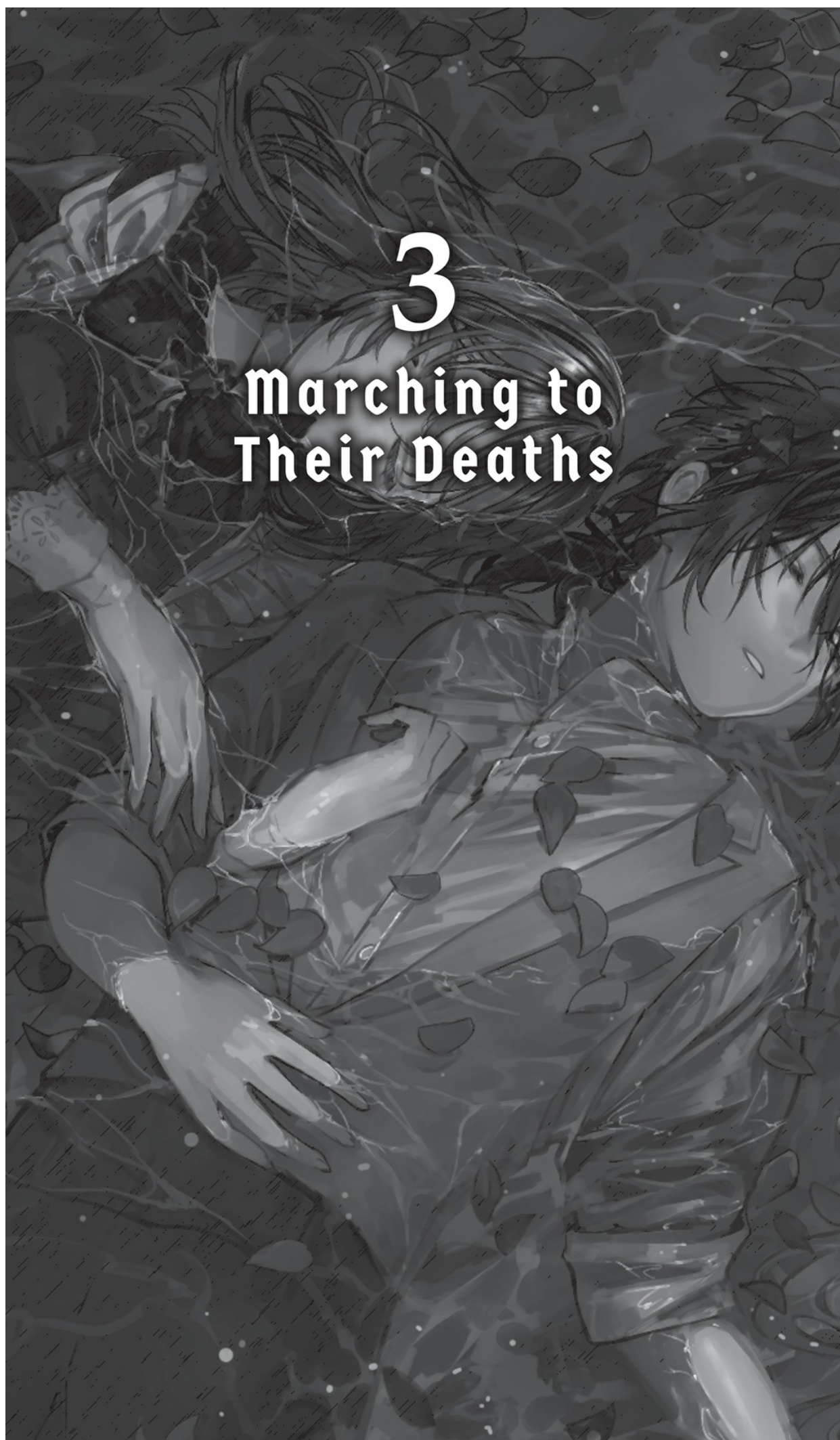
“AGUINA ELEPHABREEEEEEEEEED!”

The man who had believed so firmly that he was just
had been cruelly given up as a sacrifice.

Now it was he who served as the Sand Queen's new broken mind.

3

Marching to Their Deaths



3

Marching to Their Deaths

Aguina Elephabred held heroes in disdain.

He had loved to read when he was a boy, and that was how he had learned of the concept.

In the tales he read, they always showed up at just the right moment. The vast majority of people who read the same books he did would have regarded them with admiration. But young Aguina knew. Heroes didn't exist. Nobody was going to swoop in at the last second to save them.

The more he researched, the more he realized just how bleak the future of his people truly was.

The demi-humans had spent their long history excluding the mixed-race folk and building a rigid caste system. At the beginning, there hadn't been any larger purpose to it. It was simply the result of the purebloods' obsession with aristocracy. Now, though, deviating from that system would spell disaster for them, and even so much as loosening it would lead to immediate repercussions. The pureblood caste would collapse, and the line that marked what it meant to be demi-human would grow blurrier and blurrier. Why, their country's very leadership might get supplanted by those whose blood had been sullied by that of other races. After all, their birth rate was declining. They might have been able to weather the losses they suffered from the demons, but the fact that humanity was multiplying like rabbits weighed heavy on them.

They could hold fast to their pride, or they could perish.

Those were the only choices the demi-humans had.

This realization was what drove Aguina to his blood purity fanaticism.

That was why he hated the concept of heroes.

Whenever he heard a fairy tale, it filled his heart with scorn. He regarded them as ludicrous from the bottom of his heart.

Such a person couldn't possibly exist.

If there existed someone who had amended the injustices of the world, they would have seen his people's plight and helped them bridge that population gap.

Ironically, the very fact that Aguina existed as a blood purist served to discredit the possibility that heroes existed. In a sense, he played the role of a villain, as his very life was the personification of how nonexistent and meaningless heroes were in the world. There were no noble crusaders or legendary champions.

Or at least, there weren't supposed to be.

But when the end of days came, Aguina saw a hero with his own two eyes.

Sure enough, that boy pining for the peerless sinner that was the Torture Princess brought about a miracle.

And Aguina witnessed a noble death, too. It was a ludicrous way to go, but the man's pure wish for a star of his own and the way his faith in God remained unshaken to the end were beautiful in their own right.

Aguina Elephabred held heroes in disdain.

Fools, though? Fools, he had a soft spot for.

"And that, if nothing else, was why I wished I could be one."

"That was all there was to it, I must confess."



The Sand Queen's mind had been overwritten so that she would behave a certain way.

Now there was a pitiful man inside her.

Aguina had tried to protect the purebloods in the hidden settlement. Now, though, his soul had been twisted and placed inside the Sand Queen. For starters, his ego had probably been shattered, but even if it hadn't, contents

placed in ill-fitting vessels had a habit of breaking. And if that vessel was the body of someone who exceeded mortal comprehension, then all the more so.

By now, Aguina Elephabred was broken beyond repair.

It was perhaps only a matter of time before the surviving demi-humans and Torture Princess alike were all burned to a crisp.

Upon realizing that, Elisabeth dashed through the settlement. She raced between burning chunks of debris like a gust of wind and barreled out of the skull gate.

Then she began setting up to launch a fierce point-blank attack on the Sand Queen. All she needed to do was draw his attention her way. However, she didn't get a chance to activate so much as a single torture device.

For the Sand Queen did something wholly unexpected.

"Gu.....Gu r u.....Gi.....Ru r u.....Rurururu.....Ru.....gi....."

After a bewildering cry, she hung her head low.

Then she ran her long tongue across the lake of spilled blood. Dark mana welled up within, and the surface of the lake burst into flames.

The Sand Queen slowly began submerging herself in the black fire.

Her mind's—Aguina's—destructive impulses clearly weren't being directed at the hidden demi-human village.

"Ah, I see... Broken as you are, you would still choose as such," Elisabeth murmured quietly. She analyzed the spell that had been cast on the black lake.

Although the Sand Queen's method deviated from the norm, she was trying to teleport. And with Aguina being the blood purist he was, it wasn't difficult to guess what destination his unconscious mind would choose.

He would head to the lands of the purebloods' biggest threat—the humans.

Elisabeth reached her verdict instantly. *The Sand Queen's already begun her teleportation, and stopping her halfway is beyond us.* She hurried over to the lake.

As she ran, she conjured up a whirl of black darkness and crimson flower

petals and, without slowing down, drew Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal from within. She gave it a firm swing downward.

The swing sliced her own left arm clean off.

Her blood poured out and splattered atop the parched sand.

Elisabeth didn't close the wound. Not right away, at least. Instead, she splashed its gushing crimson flow into the black lake.

It was like watching a dance. Or like someone mixing poison into water.

"—*La* (become)."

The spell she wove was one the Torture Princess rarely used. She was tampering with the Sand Queen's teleportation magic.

The Sand Queen had less blood at her disposal than the beastfolk did when they sent the Three Kings out of their nation, and furthermore, she had no incantations to support her. Thanks to those vulnerabilities, Elisabeth was able to successfully influence her spell.

In doing so, the Torture Princess skillfully shifted the destination site.

The Sand Queen dived into the blackness none the wiser, and her massive frame vanished completely.

The moment it did, the ground around the lake's perimeter began violently moving. Sand spilled into the newly formed hole like it was being swallowed up by an ant lion pit. As the quicksand swirled in every direction, it made its way down into black depths and began filling in the lake.

With one of her arms missing, Elisabeth quickly lost her balance. Fortunately, Lute was able to catch her just in the nick of time.

"Ho-whoop!"

With a strange cry, he yanked her back to safety. However, the excess momentum caused him to collapse on his backside. He got sucked up in the sand's flow like so many ants. On seeing that, Elisabeth calmly conjured up a rope. She started by tying off her left arm to stop the bleeding, then threw the other end at Lute and caught him by the tail. She reeled him in like the catch of the day.

“I appreciate the save!” she shouted. “Now, get on back here yourself, Lute!”

“Oh, what a shameful way for me to get caught! Thank you for the assistance. I must say, though... Owwwwwww.”

Having his beloved tail squeezed like that brought tears to Lute’s eyes. Yet somehow, he managed to drag himself back up.

That was when a vermilion, lizard-headed demi-human chose to pop up. “I would ask if you two are all right...but I can see the answer for myself!”

It was Randgrof. Elisabeth was surprised. Apparently, he had chosen not to hide with the other purebloods. His good nature was clear to see, as was his sense of duty. He helped Lute to his feet. Then he plucked up Elisabeth’s arm before the sand had a chance to swallow it up and offered it back to her. He seemed a little daunted, but he spoke up all the same. “I imagine a mage like you can reattach it, no? Come on, we need to get out of here!”

“Nimbly done. You have my thanks. Let us be off, then!”

Elisabeth loosened her rope, then forcibly pressed her arm against her stump and squeezed down on the seam as she fell back alongside Randgrof and Lute. Once they’d reached a safe distance, she turned to look back.

Her eyes went wide.

Both the black lake and the fire were gone without a trace.

In their place, a hexagonal tower of sand rose high into the sky. It was the exact same shape as the demi-human sanctuaries, and it was cracked on the edges like over-pounded sugar candy. Then, all at once, the tower crumbled. A dry yellow wind blew past.

When it faded, there was nothing there.

Abruptly, Randgrof fell to his knees. He must have heard Lute’s shout earlier, as he let out a vacant murmur. “Father... Her Majesty the Sand Queen... What the hell is even happening? I don’t...”

Elisabeth and Lute had no reply to that. They just stared at the space before them.

The Sand Queen had vanished off to the human lands.

And with her, she had brought death and destruction anew.



A calamity cometh.

A calamity cometh.

To all the people of the land.

It was like an apostle's proclamation—the calamity that was the Sand Queen was on the move. By all rights, she should have already been burning the human territories to the ground. However, Elisabeth had interfered with her destination site and changed it to a mountain range far to the east. There were no houses there, nor did anyone harvest any natural resources from the area. It was about as far from human habitation as you could get.

That bought humanity a little time to try to come up with countermeasures. However, preventing the Sand Queen's invasion altogether had been beyond Elisabeth, and the prospects of them being able to stop her en route were slim. After all, her wounds had already been patched up.

Furthermore, she still had enough mana in her to wreak all manners of destruction.

The broken toy had been repaired, and her key had been wound back up.

What was mankind to do, now that they were faced with this new peril? Elisabeth turned her thoughts as fast as they could go.

I doubt we've any option but to destroy her reactor again... She has her scales, but we hold a better picture of her weaknesses than we did before. It shan't be easy, certainly, but we've no choice but to try. Damn it all. If this were the final battle we had to face, that would be one thing...

Elisabeth ground her teeth. If they threw the saints and everything else they had at her, they actually stood a pretty good chance. The problem was, the Fremd Torturchen was waiting right in the wings. It was all too easy to imagine what would happen if Alice came back right in the middle of their battle with the Sand Queen. Mankind simply lacked the power to take both of them on at once.

If that happened, there would be no way for them to escape annihilation.

They needed to kill the Sand Queen, and they needed to kill her now.

Elisabeth thought back to Kaito Sena's True Message.

"Fool. You would ask me to believe in you, even in a situation such as this?" she muttered.

She was still drenched in her own blood.

She stared off into empty space like an infant. However, she soon shook her head.

This was no time to waste dwelling on idle thoughts. She needed to get back to the Capital as fast as she could so she could tell them about the situation. Conveniently enough, her surroundings were already splattered with her blood. She began drawing a teleportation circle.

Then Lute interrupted her. His voice was oddly grave. "Ah, I see. Fate can be a funny thing, can't it? Maybe this was what my people's turmoil was leading to. It made us think long and hard about the weight of our own lives, and maybe that will be what lets us make a choice we won't regret."

"What are you on about, Lute? Don't tell me *you're* going to get all gloomy and muddled on me."

It wasn't like him to be so roundabout with his words. Elisabeth couldn't help but be a bit worried about him.

Lute looked up. The look in his eyes was firm and unclouded. He straightened his posture and spoke with deep solemnity. "I can't make any promises, Captain Elisabeth, but the world is in peril again, and the end is nigh. My people and the demi-humans were once sworn friends, and I believe we have it in us to make the right decision."

Elisabeth was about to reiterate her question, but she stopped. There was a strange sort of drive burning in Lute's eyes. He closed his mouth and said no more. It was obvious that she wasn't going to get any clearer of an answer out of him than that.

Randgrof, who'd been listening to their exchange from the side, wore a

similar expression to Lute's. Still silent, he clenched his fists tight. He didn't seem any more likely than Lute to give voice to his thoughts.

Realizing there was nothing to be done about it, Elisabeth turned back. Petals scattered as she completed her teleportation circle. The florid crimson splashes hardened into walls, obscuring Lute and Randgrof from view.

The two of them saw her off through to the very end.

And all the while, they were brimming with a tragic sort of bravery.



"...and now the Sand Queen is on the move. We need to deploy combat assets so as to intercept her."

As soon as Elisabeth returned, the first thing she did was explain what had happened.

She was in the underground tomb, standing before the round table in the royal council room.

The moment she entered that cramped chamber, she immediately laid out the situation.

When she ended on the news of their new foe's march, the conversation came to a standstill.

Maclaeus, his attendants, a smattering of aristocrats and high priest representatives, and Izabella all stared at her in disbelief. When Elisabeth arrived, they had still been discussing Alice and the Saint's death.

However, it was hard to fault them too much for that. The Church and its religion had been the cornerstone of human society for many years, yet now their central pillar, the Saint, had chosen to sacrifice herself and perish. If anything, it would've been stranger if their discussion hadn't been in disarray.

Now Elisabeth had dropped yet another bombshell in their laps.

With how somber the room was, it was like the world was ending or something.

Suddenly, one of the high priests—an elderly man who'd stayed neutral during the schism between the reconstruction sect and the moderates—rose to

his feet. He thrust one of his withered fingers at Elisabeth.

“What?” she responded. “If you’ve something you wish to say, do at least try to be quick about it.”

“Why couldn’t you have been the one to die?” he spat, the crinkles in his face quivering. *Ah*. Elisabeth nodded.

The question was one born of abject hysteria, but it wasn’t completely without merit. Even Elisabeth found it somewhat odd that she was the one who’d been left behind. That said, it was the Saint herself who had determined that the Torture Princess was a piece better suited for a protracted battle. That was all there was to it. However, the high priest was clearly unconvinced.

His scarlet vestments swished as he prattled on.

“Why is Her Holiness the Saint gone, yet the Torture Princess draws breath? And not only did the peerless sinner have the audacity to survive, she even comes and brings us more calamity? It’s not too late, you know. You can still go to Her Holiness and die instead of—”

“You must really be distraught, to want us to sacrifice our own forces. I hope you’ll forgive me this impropriety.”

The words rang with great courtesy as the fist sank squarely into the priest’s cheek. His wrinkled face crumpled inward.

The discrepancy between the voice’s tone and the sheer violence of the act was a sight to behold.

On both counts, the culprit was Izabella. She lowered her fist, her silver hair swaying. However, it was clear that she had held back as much as possible.

The priest stumbled a little, but was otherwise none the worse for wear. Another high priest grabbed his shoulder to help support him. The second man had been one of the moderates, as well as Godd Deos’s direct pupil. After his mentor’s death, he assumed Godd Deos’s position.

His long hair rustled as he shook his head. When he spoke, his voice was calm. “Compose yourself. In this case, Madam Vicker is right. Now, Elisabeth Le Fanu, you just comported yourself as an apostle heralding a calamity and told us that

the Sand Queen is on the move, do I have that right? In other words, she's sided with the Fremd Torturchen and is assisting with her rampage?"

"Not in the strictest sense, no. But explaining the particulars would take time we don't have. I'll be sure to write you a full report later. The long and short of it is that she's coming for the human lands, and she won't stop till she's laid waste to us all."

This time, it was Macclaeus who spoke up. "Any coordinated bombardment we try with the paladins and priests would cost us too much, and it wouldn't give us the firepower we need anyway. It looks like we don't have a choice but to deploy the saints, even if it means leaving the Capital undefended for a time. Do you know where exactly it is she appeared?"

As always, he carried himself with composure. But in truth, he was doing everything he could to keep his terror in check. His eyes still retained a great deal of their youthfulness, and he couldn't conceal the fear lurking in their depths. However, they didn't have the leisure to worry about such things at the moment. Elisabeth chose to ignore the king's emotions.

Instead, she just answered his question.

"That I do. I shifted her drop site as far as I could. The problem is..."

"We still have to deal with the Fremd Torturchen, right," Izabella murmured to continue her thought. "That means we'll want to keep our casualties as low as we can get them... Still, even if this will mark her third death, it's still the Sand Queen we're dealing with. We're up against long odds."

Elisabeth nodded. Their only choice was to pull out all the stops to deal with the threat before them. There was no point worrying about the future if they were going to be dead before it even arrived. If mankind was to survive, this counterattack needed to succeed.

The discussion moved on to details of how they were going to deploy the saints.

The air was thick with tension. Despite the voices clearly audible, the room felt as still as a seabed.

That was, until the door swung loudly open.

“King Maclaeus, big news!”

An outsider barged into the room. It was one of the officials who’d been monitoring the communication devices. Everyone turned anxiously to look at him, wondering what it could be now. Under the weight of their tense stares, the official shouted excitedly. “The message is from Sir Randgrof Elephabred of the demi-humans and Sir Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast of the beastfolk! They’ve received permission from their respective leaders and are working together to assemble a joint army!”

“The beastfolk and demi-humans, together?”

“And what’s more, the injured Three Kings of the Forest are joining the march. They’re coming to stand against the Sand Queen!”

That certainly sent the room astir.

As it did, Elisabeth finally realized what Lute had meant.

So the beastfolk understand.

The Sand Queen was being controlled by Aguina, and between his broken mind and his obsession with blood purity, there was little doubt that he would turn his attention to the beastfolk after he was done with the humans. Plus, even if the humans prevailed, Alice’s slaughter was right around the corner. And those who numbered strongest among the beastfolk, the Three Kings of the Forest, were ill-suited for battle against pesky little rats.

In other words, the beastfolk were doomed if they lost the shield that mankind represented.

Considering all those conditions, the choice they were making was more or less the best one they had.

And that choice was to help humanity preserve its strength.

No one wants to die, after all.

However, there were also those whose positions were such that they had to protect others, even if it meant throwing themselves to the wolves.

It was a sad, lonely lot, having to shoulder the weight of the world. Yet the Three Kings of the Forest had chosen to act for their people’s sake all the same.

The room was full of clamor and commotion, but Elisabeth alone remained silent.

The official clutched his abdomen as he quickly relayed the rest of his information.

“The message went on! ‘We and the demi-humans are old friends, and as their friend, the duty to cut off their head falls to us. We wish to leave the battle with the Fremd Torturchen to our new friends the humans.’ And there was one more thing...”

*“The Three Kings of the Forest
are marching to their deaths.”*

And march they would, for the sake of the countless lives that hung in the balance.

Shedding rivers of their noble, precious blood as they went.

The Three Kings’ declaration echoed through the room, then vanished into silence.



Come, let us sing a victory hymn.

What lies beyond death? What lies after death? What awaits us following death?

It isn’t oblivion. It isn’t tragedy. It isn’t despair. It isn’t the end.

It’s life. Our deaths will pave the way for new life.

The moment we drew our swords, victory was already at our hands.

So let us sing. Let us sing our victory hymn.

Sing of a battle that will live on beyond us.

Sing loud the victory hymn of our kings.

And sing loud they did, scores of soldiers all in unison.

It was clear to Elisabeth that it wasn’t merely a victory hymn. It was just as much a funeral march.

The soldiers all knew the implications of the choice the Three Kings of the Forest were making, and still they chose to honor their kings' resolve and fight for the sake of their people. However, that didn't stop them from grieving for their kings' willingness to die.

Their procession had a dignified gravity to it, and the grim sound of their march echoed through the forest. They were walking to their own graves, and they all knew it. Yet even so, not a single one of them even thought of stopping.

Leading up the solemn march were Randgrof and Vyadryavka. Both of them had been impressively fast to make their choices and act. They had made their case themselves, they had won over the rest of the beastfolk imperial family, and now they were standing at death's gate.

And there was another familiar face among the soldiers' ranks as well—Lute's.

"So this is what you were getting at earlier," Elisabeth said to him. "'Twas a welcome choice from our perspective, but I'll admit to some shock at your Three Kings having chosen to battle to their deaths amid your country's national crisis, much less that such a thing was allowed."

"C-Captain Elisabeth! What are you doing here, ma'am?"

"Really?" Elisabeth shot back in exasperation. "What could possibly compel you to believe I would sit this battle out after hearing its particulars? The very thought of doing so would be ludicrous. Am I wrong?"

Lute's tail was all puffed up. By the look of it, he really was surprised to see her. The man had many talents, but reading the room wasn't one of them, nor was being quick on the uptake.

Even deep in the undeveloped mountains, the path between the trees was flat and easy on the feet, and the view was clear and unobscured. A damp forest wind lapped at Elisabeth's cheeks. The air was humid and ripe with the smell of rusty iron.

That was all due to the Three Kings of the Forest mowing down the trees and leveling the ground in their path.

Everything in their wake was dyed red with their blood.

Lute veered away from the beastfolk procession for a minute. He and Elisabeth took shelter behind some trees.

There, he gave her his thoughts on the current state of affairs.

“In a sense, it’s that same national crisis that made this possible. Before, the imperial family was divided. But they all shared the same fear of annihilation. That was what made them tearily accept the Three Kings of the Forest’s decision. It simply goes to show what sort of influence the Three Kings of the Forest wield.”

“Kings going to battle gravely wounded to fight for their people and the lives yet to come... Why, ’tis almost like something out of a storybook. I can easily imagine what a beautifully tragic scene it would have made for. Little wonder, then, they were able to move so many hearts.”

Elisabeth frowned. You wouldn’t have known it by her words, but she despised heroic epics.

More often than not, stories that ended with everyone living happily ever after were just there to mask the tragedies that lay beneath, with their heroes stripped of every last vestige of their personalities. At the same time, though, there was something she had to begrudgingly admit.

Beautiful stories had the power to spur people into action.

This story was one well worthy of being told for ages to come.

What she and the others were about to witness was the birth of a legend.

She shook her head to dispel her saccharine reverie. Once she’d cleared her mind, she spoke calmly. “Mankind has sent me, Torture Princess Elisabeth Le Fanu, as well as three-fifths of the saints to join in this battle, with Jeanne de Rais, Izabella Vicker, and one of the other fifths waiting on standby. That said, we’ve already lost La Mules and La Christoph, the two who’d be best suited for this sort of counterattack. I intend to stand on the front lines, but the plan is to have the others acting solely as support for the Three Kings. We sent a signaller ahead, so Vyadryavka should already be aware of our intentions.”

“Roger that, ma’am. I’m sure that’s about what the Three Kings of the Forest, Sir Randgrof, and Lord Vyadryavka Ula Forstlast expected. At the end of the day,

it's us beastfolk and a handful of the demi-humans who have chosen this place to die. The victory hymn is ours, as is the funeral march. If Lady Vyade Ula Forstlast were here, I imagine she would say the same thing."

"I see. Very well, then. Oh, and Lute...one other thing."

"What's that?"

"Don't you dare die today."

When he heard her curt warning, Lute conspicuously avoided meeting her gaze. Elisabeth gave him a kick in the rear, and a rough one at that. It nearly sent him crashing into a tree. Then, speaking as his captain, she tore him a new one. "You absolute dunce, you have a child on the way! My plan is to act independently of the army, but I have every intention of doing it with my men by my side, and I'm of no mind to let you lot die. So don't. Consider that an order."



It wasn't something one would typically expect to hear from the Torture Princess. However, Elisabeth said it knowing full well how ridiculous she sounded. Even in a crisis such as theirs, there were some people whose role it was to survive.

This was a battle to secure the future.

Everyone there knew and boasted of it, and the man before her was one they couldn't afford to let die.

Lute averted his eyes again. However, mentioning his child had produced a marked change in his expression. He gave her a deep nod. "Of course. I have no intention of dying for nothing. That I swear, for Ain's sake as well."

There was something ominous about his words, but there could be no doubting the unshakable resolve resting within them.

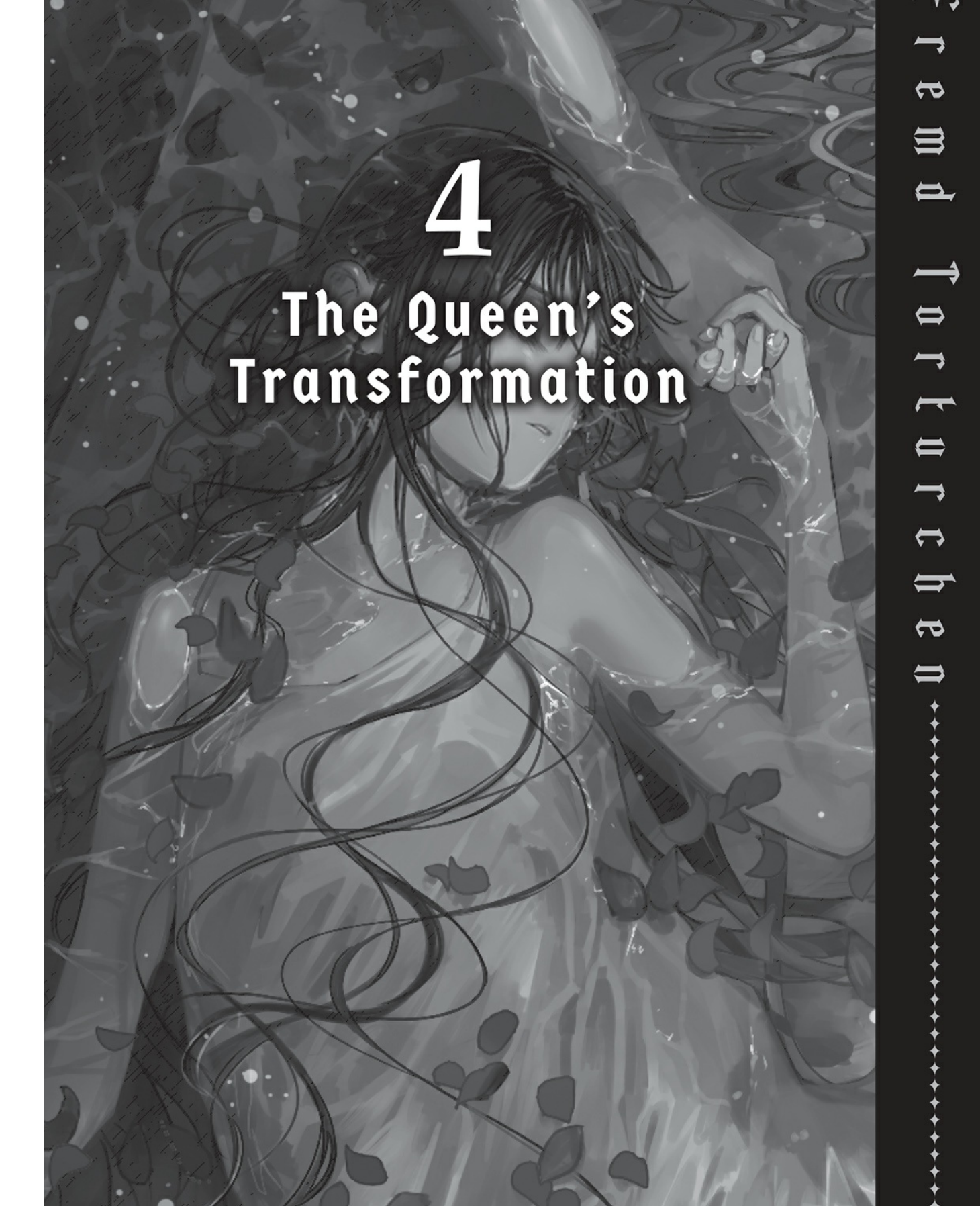
Elisabeth had a mind to continue her warning. Before she could get the words out, though, a violent tremor shook the air.

The bugle had been blown.

Loud, loud, loud it blew.

It was like a messenger had come to deliver a message: A calamity cometh.

The broken Queen has arrived, in all her glory.



4

The Queen's Transformation

F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e n

4

The Queen's Transformation

It's time for a confession.

Lute was a simple, awkward man with a heart full of compassion and righteousness who cared deeply about his wife and his friends. Part of that was due to his nature as a beastman, but it was just as much a product of his own personal convictions. In his eyes, any man who couldn't protect the people he cared about was no man at all, and a disgrace to the beastfolk to boot. That was something he believed deeply.

Once, though, he went against those beliefs and committed a grave sin.

There was something he had forgotten. Something he had absolutely needed to remember.

Back at the World Tree, a thought crossed his mind.

Perhaps he ought to remember Kaito Sena's smile.

It would be best if he made sure to remember it, no matter what happened.

But he forgot. And that wasn't all. There were oh-so-many things that had slipped his mind.

It's time for a story.

A story about who Kaito Sena was by nature.

Lute had checked all his information in the beastfolk lands. Kaito Sena came from another world, one where he'd been abused and eventually killed. Then the Torture Princess had summoned him to act as her servant. Originally, though, he had been nothing but a powerless boy, a tragic child victimized without anyone to protect him.

Yet somehow, everyone had forgotten that simple fact.

None of the adults whose job it was to defend the world had remembered it.

Lute and the others had collectively placed the burden of the entire world on the back of a single boy. They were the ones who were soldiers. It should have been their burden to bear.

Kaito Sena offered no reply to his cry of regret.

All he did—

—was smile a vaguely awkward smile.

Then after thinking it over for a moment, Kaito reacted. He waved with big, childlike sweeps. The meaning of that gesture was the same across worlds. And because of that, Lute gasped. When Lute realized that, he cried out Kaito's name.

As he did, Kaito kept frantically waving.

He was saying a single word.

“Good-bye.”

Lute had never forgotten that moment.

Not a single day went by where he didn't think about it.



Someday, someone would probably tell the tale with a lyre in one hand.

Come, little ones. Come, and behold.

Picture the sight. Picture the four monarchs, standing amid the flattened trees.

Picture those who are too exalted, too noble, and too beautiful for us to even imagine.

Picture the Sand Queen and the hermaphroditic Three Kings of the Forest.

All of them were drenched in blood. And unlike the Kings, the Queen had lost her sanity to boot. Her eyes were staring off in different directions. The only thing lucid about her was the sheer bloodlust she was directing at any she considered to be in her way.

The Three Kings responded to her malice in kind. The ancient wolf turned to the heavens, the white deer stomped its hooves, and the colossal hawk spread its wings wide.

Then the Kings and Queen all opened their mouths in unison.

A quartet of voices split the air like lightning.

The noise quickly departed the range humans could hear. Yet heard or not, the Three Kings of the Forest roared on. Looking at them, it was clear they were singing an elegy.

After all this time, their sworn friend's corpse had lost its mind. How could they learn of that and not grieve?

However, their profound sorrow was met with flame.

The Sand Queen's magical firebombing was much like the fixed batteries'. Anyone on the receiving end would be burned to a crisp.

With nary a pause, the colossal hawk swept its battered wings. Blood spilled off them as a great wind blew forth. The shock wave dissipated the heat and extinguished it, and the ancient wolf followed up by kicking off against the ground and leaping into the air.

Mountains trembled. The earth cracked.

The beastfolk had braced themselves for the impact in advance, but even that wasn't enough to stop them from all tumbling ignobly to the ground. If they hadn't been ready, some of them might have actually died. Shouted warnings sounded through the air from all over. All the while, the ancient wolf soared.

Higher and higher it went, a black shadow against the sky.

The sun went dark, and a rain of blood poured down.

Then the ancient wolf brought its arm down on the Sand Queen. However, its claws merely bounced off her scales and snapped off.

The broken claws spun through the air and fell right in the middle of the army.

"Fall back, fall back! Take cover! Ahhhhhhhh!"

One fervent scream rose up after another. By some stroke of fortune, none of

them ended up getting skewered. Still, the fallen claws towered high over the army, each one easily taller than any of the beastfolk present. The procession's terror was all too visible in the way they held their tails and ears.

Next, the white deer turned its hooves on the Sand Queen.

The King shifted its weight forward in an attempt to trample the Queen, causing the ground to tremble so hard that cracks began forming across the mountain. The Sand Queen squirmed, but the hooves were unerring. The immense weight being focused on their tips caused a small chunk of the Sand Queen's scales to peel upward a hair.

A familiar cry split the air.

"Ready, aim, fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiire!"

Much the way Aguina once had, Randgrof Elephabred gave the order.

A bombardment roared out, flames gushing from the cannons set up atop the slanted mountainside as one shot rang out after another in succession. It was a tremendous display, made possible only by the demi-humans' incredible transportation skills. The relentless, merciless bombardment served to illustrate the stubbornness, or to an extent, the ill nature of the ones unleashing it. Aguina had approved scant few to operate the cannons, and the ruthless efficiency with which they worked went to show what model examples they were of the demi-humans' natural disposition. Furthermore, those were no cannonballs they were firing.

They were silver harpoons coated in the blood of the Three Kings. They slammed into the Sand Queen one after another. Over a dozen of them merely bounced off her.

However, three of the harpoons managed to slip between the dislocated scales.

The ancient wolf grabbed hold of the harpoons' chains and gave them a relentless yank.

The Sand Queen's vast body rose up off the ground and tore loudly through the air itself. The ancient wolf knew that if it slammed her straight back down, there was no way the beastfolk would emerge unscathed. Instead, it used the

short time before the chains snapped to hurl the Sand Queen against a nearby mountain. The sound of every bone in her body snapping under her own weight split the air. However, the Sand Queen was unable to feel pain.

After landing, the Sand Queen slowly rose back up and let out a cry. Elisabeth still couldn't see her in her entirety, but her instincts told her that the Sand Queen was all but unharmed.

The sole damage she'd sustained was losing one of her scales in its entirety.

Elisabeth wasted no time in letting out a soft murmur.

"Nail Gun."

A spiral of crimson petals and black darkness raced forward, and rusted nails the size of thin pillars appeared out of the air. In a perfect world, her goal would have been to pierce the Sand Queen's mana source through, but her scales had previously made that impossible. Now, though, Elisabeth was able to focus her attack straight at the Sand Queen's one bare patch of skin.

A thunking noise rang out in succession. Black blood gushed out from between the nails, and the Sand Queen let out a roar of anguish. Even without the ability to feel pain, she was still able to tell when she was losing fluids.

A chorus rose up to join her roar.

"Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAA!"

There was an eerie solemnity to the voices. They sounded just as much like a scream as they did a hymn.

A flock of birds. A school of fish. Rainbow light. Drops of blood.

The divine beasts all shot toward the Sand Queen at once, using Elisabeth's nails as a target to land on and explode. The Sand Queen's flesh tore, causing massive amounts of blood to spill out and drench her surroundings. Elisabeth gave a small nod.

The Sand Queen's blood was full of mana. The more of it they could spill, the better off the beastfolk would be.

"Let's see if we can bleed her dry, shall we?"

Seeing that the tactic was effective, the Torture Princess fired off more volleys of nails.

The thunking ran out once more as Elisabeth stabbed, pierced, and penetrated the wound.

“Adjust for the second row, fifth from the right! Fire!”

Meanwhile, the beastfolk were making their move as well. They took advantage of the Sand Queen’s immobility to finish adjusting their great bows, then carefully aimed between the peeling scales and fired.

Their bows lacked the raw firepower the cannons had, but they allowed for far more precise sniping, and their arrowheads were coated in the same underling poison they’d used during Ragnarok. The Sand Queen was a corpse, so the poison had little effect on her body’s ability to function, but its corrosive effects were powerful nonetheless. The scales around the impact sites began melting.

That then allowed for more harpoons to find their mark. The ancient wolf grabbed the chains once more.

The Sand Queen swayed on her feet. Waves of heat exploded erratically from her mouth, blasting away the topology of a nearby mountain.

Some of the soldiers got caught up in the shock wave from the impact. Viscera spilled from their mangled torsos.

Little ones such as them were so terribly fragile.

Before the Sand Queen could do any more damage, the ancient wolf reached out and clamped her mouth shut.

As it did, the white deer smashed her womb, and the colossal hawk pecked away at her legs.

The battle was going far better for the Three Kings of the Forest than anyone could have imagined. They were all injured, but at the same time, the Sand Queen had already been destroyed once, and the beastfolk, demi-humans, and humans already knew how she fought.

By all accounts, their victory was almost at hand. Upon seeing that, Elisabeth

narrowed her eyes.

...Hmm?

And there, for the first time,
she realized that something felt off.



She's hardly putting up a fight. Surely this can't be what Alice wished for.

Elisabeth frowned. At the same time, though, there was a part of her that said, "So what?"

Maybe the Sand Queen had suffered more damage than Alice had accounted for. Perhaps that was all there was to it. The problem was, that child really, truly wanted for everyone to all die together. Would a girl that driven really overestimate her toy soldier by such a degree? Elisabeth found that hard to imagine.

On the other hand, she had no means to convey her misgivings to the Three Kings of the Forest, nor would she have even had time to.

The gross humiliation continued playing out before her eyes.

Scales and claws went flying. Flesh tore. Blood was shed. Viscera was spilled.

The Three Kings of the Forest were tearing the Sand Queen apart piece by piece. It was horrible to look at. However, it was also logical. If you wanted to put down someone who was already dead, you needed to destroy their body to the point where it could no longer move.

Elisabeth coolly observed the scene before her.

As she did, she was reminded of a battle she'd fought once before.

This wasn't Elisabeth's first time going up against someone who had been broken.

For example, there was her final battle against the demons. By having their egos destroyed, they had attained a whole different sort of power than usual.

Aguina Elephabred was a studious man. I've little doubt he knew about the demonic flesh mass and its attack on the Capital.

An ominous premonition came over her as she mused on that fact. However, there was no reason to believe that, even if faced with defeat, the Sand Queen would be able to transform herself the way they did. The incident at the Capital came about due to the rare confluence of demonic contracts being mixed with ego death. In the Sand Queen's case, that didn't apply. It had no reason to.

Yet for some reason, Elisabeth's sense of foreboding refused to go away.

Then the ancient wolf's gargantuan arm sank into the Sand Queen's body. Her skin should have been elastic, but all of a sudden, it lost that quality.

Elisabeth's eyes went wide at the impossible turn of events.

The transformation was starting.

"What's going on?"

"The Sand Queen's...falling apart?"

The beastfolk let out cries of confusion, and Elisabeth couldn't help but stare as well. However, out of the blue, her instincts as the Torture Princess screamed the answer to her, and all at once, she realized what was going on.

Ah, so that's it! The Sand Queen's a corpse! She isn't alive!

In other words, that meant that her entire body was nothing more than raw magical material.

The demi-humans were poorly versed in the ways of magic. However, they had learned of the beastfolk technique of using corpses as raw material to perform magic with during their joint battle at Ragnarok, and while they thought of the beastfolk as old friends, the possibility of eventually finding themselves as enemies had always been at the back of the demi-humans' minds. It stood to reason that Aguina would have researched the technique in more depth later on.

He made a choice based on that knowledge, and the material writhed in accordance.

Scales melted, flesh crumbled and commingled with blood, bones faded away, everything swelled up,

and, with a *pop*,

it all burst.



Ahrasa Aina, o'er Dragons' Graveyard the sun rises and flashes

Ahrasa Aréna, blistering sands wash over her cold silver ashes

Deep within an eternal sleep, her ever-closed eyes watch over her sheep

Ensuring all her descendants are honest and true and good and resplendent

Please, my queen, know it is true, believe in us as we believe in you

Elisabeth thought back to those lines from the epigraph to the Sand Queen's legend.

When she first read the passage, a question had sprung to her mind.

Wouldn't an entity that watched over her sheep and ensured that everyone was honest and true and good and resplendent—and with "ever-closed eyes," no less—be terrifying? she thought. It seemed to her that the song could be taken as something like an aphorism for those children.

There wasn't a demi-human pureblood in the world who hadn't heard that legend, and in all likelihood, Aguina had taken away the same impression from it that Elisabeth had. By the looks of things, the song had played a key role in shaping the Queen's transformation.

By now, her entire body had crumbled.

Her scales had melted away in their entirety, and her flesh and blood were all merged together. She no longer had any sort of defined silhouette. Instead, her whole body from top to bottom had become a soft, flabby blob. And that blob was covered in eyes. Eyes, innumerable eyes, swiveling every which way.

That *thing* wasn't the Sand Queen anymore.

It was just an entity that judged everyone and determined if they were honest and true and good and resplendent.

It was a monster that saw everything.

It was hideous. It was evil. It was wise. It was broken beyond repair.

“What the hell is that—ack, gack, GAH!”

“Don’t breathe in if you can help it!” Elisabeth shouted as she covered her mouth. “It might well be the last thing you do!”

Pungent poisonous fumes were rising up from the fleshy blob at an alarming rate. It was because all the Sand Queen’s blood had gotten compressed at once. Soldiers fell to the ground where they stood and started vomiting. Beastfolk had a strong sense of smell. They wouldn’t be able to endure it for long. Elisabeth snapped her fingers. Crimson petals and black darkness whirled up and blew as a powerful gust.

As she did, the colossal hawk gently flapped its wings as well, protecting its people by blowing away the stagnant air.

Meanwhile, the flesh blob began wriggling.

Its surface extended outward with terrifying speed, and it turned a bizarre “arm” on its avian foe. The glutinous tentacle grabbed one of the colossal hawk’s wings. The inside of the arm was lined with teeth.

The blob bit down with them and ripped the wing clean off.

Blood splattered the ground. A shrill screech rose up, as did a bellowing roar.

The ancient wolf wrenched its arm free from the flesh blob and used its tremendous claws to grab the blob once more. It pulled with all its might and tore the blob in half. However, the halves simply sprang back.

They rejoined all on their own and stuck fast to each other. The whole army collectively stared, dumbfounded.

The flesh blob had done the impossible, and it had done so in the most ridiculous manner imaginable. It all kind of felt like a bad joke.

“Nail Gun.”

Elisabeth shot some stakes at it to test the waters. A muffled *bwoinnnnng* echoed sadly through the air.

All the nails had hit their target.

However, that was *all* they had done.

It made sense, in a way. The Sand Queen's body had already degraded as much as it could. There was no point trying to damage it further. Her blood was all blended into her flesh, and her mana reactor had moved inside her body.

All her vulnerabilities were gone.

At the end of the day, the Sand Queen was nothing more than a walking corpse, and now she was taking full advantage of that fact. For all the efficiency her transformation boasted, though, it was also as blasphemous as blasphemy could be. This wasn't a choice any normal man would have made.

In short, that speaks to the sheer degree Aquina has been broken, Elisabeth mused bitterly.

Meanwhile, the Three Kings' bewilderment was shaking the air itself.

Never could they have imagined their old friend's corpse losing everything down to its very form. In the Sand Queen's current state, it was impossible to even grieve for her anymore. All that existed now was a comedically unidentifiable blob of flesh.

A sad realization started dawning on those assembled there.

The curtain had closed early on the battle of legend they'd been expecting.

All they had to look forward to now was a sad, honorless brawl that would go on until the flesh blob's tank ran dry.



Hooves smashed eyes. Claws tore flesh.

Poisonous blood went spraying in every direction.

The Three Kings of the Forest continued their melee, and the flesh blob took their fierce onslaught head-on. Suddenly, though, it began writhing again. The moment before the next kick made contact, the blob's eyes turned into mouths. It chomped down on the King's leg, hoof and all.

The white deer hurriedly wrenched its leg free, but its entire ankle had already been eaten. White bone peeked out from inside the wound. And the ancient wolf's paw met the same fate. Just like its royal brethren, all the flesh on its fingers was gnawed off.

The way the flesh blob was fighting was too bizarre for words. The Three Kings of the Forest were getting played for fools.

However, the blob's new body did make it considerably more vulnerable to long-range attacks.

"Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAAA!"

The saints renewed their bombardment. Blinding light smashed into the blob over and over, burning away chunks of it and shaving it down.

Compared to before her transformation, fire-based attacks seemed to be far more effective against the Queen. However, there was still a problem.

The saints no longer had anyone who could gather and coordinate their attacks or alleviate their burden, and individually, they weren't cut out for protracted battles. Many of them were already vomiting up blood, and it wouldn't be long before they'd all reached their limits.

"I had hoped to be able to preserve my mana, but I can see that isn't an option. I'd best be prepared to drain my reserves dry."

Elisabeth clapped her hands against the crimson ground and conjured a pair of small stakes.

With them, she pierced her own hands through. Her blood poured out, mixing in with the Three Kings' blood that had been spilled across the ground. Elisabeth then used the mixture to draw a magic circle she would normally never use.

With it, she carefully called forth the entity she deemed best suited for the job.

"Wicker Man!"

Darkness and petals burst and scattered, and a dry, snapping sound emanated as dark boughs reached out.

A massive, birdcage-like figure knit itself together with the flesh blob at its center. It was far larger than any other time Elisabeth had deployed it, and it was shaped differently as well. This time, it had stumpy limbs and a long, protracted torso. It almost resembled a jail cell that had been locked up tight.

Furthermore, its boughs were tightly interlaced. The flesh blob struggled and raged, but the figure obstinately refused to release it. Instead, it burst into tempestuous flames.

Dainty, feminine screams rose up from within as a chorus of mouths all cried in minutely varied pitches.

However, the person controlling those flames—Elisabeth—clicked her tongue.

“’Tis insufficient. I haven’t the power to burn her through. Abandoning the Sand Queen’s form has made her hardy, I’ll give her that.”

The blob was soft and vulnerable. However, burning it down to charcoal would have required a truly prodigious amount of thermal power. Plus, the mass of eyeballs had begun crying, drenching the flames and weakening them before Elisabeth’s eyes.

“That Aguina, always a clever one,” she muttered, chagrined.

Despite the Sand Queen’s mind being broken, the finesse with which she was manipulating her body was downright scary. And unlike how fervent her impulse to wreak destruction to protect her race was, she seemed to have no such compulsion to preserve her own form. That alone made her a formidable foe.

At this point, it comes to a matter of how much the Three Kings can crush on top of the amount I already burned away.

That was the ultimate verdict Elisabeth settled on. The flesh blob’s very existence lay outside mankind’s ability to fully comprehend, and although a powered-up Fremd Torturchen numbered among their foes, their side had no mages on par with Kaito Sena.

The only ones who could take on foes surpassing the fourteen demons were entities of a similar caliber.

Then, right as Elisabeth finished arriving at her conclusion, she heard something.

It was the sound of hooves striking the ground. And pretty close to her, at

that.

She looked up with a start. There, she spotted a summoned beast that looked like a cross between a lizard and a horse. Elisabeth had seen those creatures before. The three races summoned them during Ragnarok, and by the looks of it, the beastfolk still owned some.

There were just over a dozen of them, and they cut through the foul air and dodged the chunks of blobby flesh hurtling between the trees as they raced forward.

As the pack passed her by, Elisabeth saw something more.

The people mounted on the beasts were none other than her own Peace Brigade.

Randgrof Elephabred was riding at the vanguard,

and beside him on the same mount, Lute was manning the reins.

Note written to Elisabeth celebrating her one-year anniversary with the Peace Brigade

You do good work, Captain.

Thank you for always staying late.

I know there's a lot about our country you're probably not used to, so if you ever have questions, don't hesitate to ask us.

You're an inspiration, ma'am!

GOOD WORK THIS PAST YEAR. I LOOK FORWARD TO ANOTHER YEAR WORKING WITH YOU!

Stop bringing out your torture devices when you get mad at us!

← who wrote this?

You always do so much for us, Captain. Don't forget to rely on us every now and again.

Please coach me on how to fight better!

Lady Vynode was thrilled with your results this past year, too.

You're the coolest!

Congratulations on one full year, Captain Elisabeth!

Seeing you take the initiative in fights is so inspiring.

I want to be like you, Captain.

I'm going to train hard so I can help you more.

Watching you battle is mesmerizing, Captain.

I found a great restaurant. I'll tell you all about it later.

Your skills are the finest around, and you have my utmost respect.

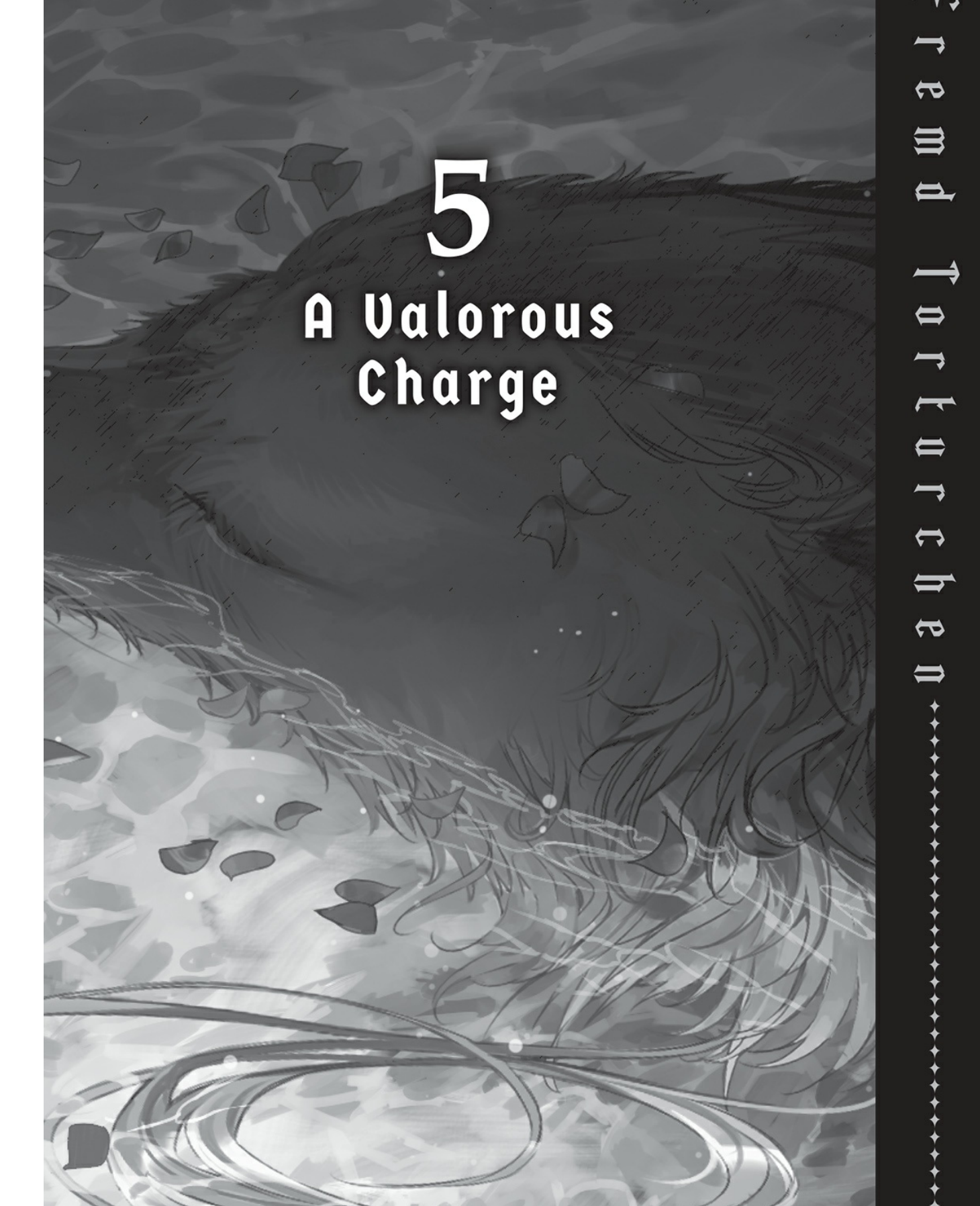
Let's keep fighting together to protect the peace

PLEASE GIVE ME A RAISE.

↑
yeah, same

↑
she's going to be pissed at whoever wrote this

Glory to our captain! Long live the Peace Brigade!



5

A Valorous Charge

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

A Valorous Charge

Randgrof Elephabred held his father in disdain.

In a sense, that wasn't how he really felt.

On an intellectual level, he held a great deal of respect toward his father. If he didn't, he never would have taken Aguina's advice to move to the hidden village. His father was easily an accomplished enough man to be worthy of his admiration.

At the same time, though, Randgrof did not have a high opinion of his father.

For Randgrof Elephabred knew.

He knew that Aguina Elephabred was a kind, loving father.

But he also knew that the man was capable of making unbelievably vile choices without an ounce of remorse.

Randgrof grew up under the watchful eyes of his mother, who was wise yet was also a bit of an oddball, and his wet nurse, who was calm and gentle. He didn't even interact with his father that much. But before he knew it, he had realized something.

His father was a monster.

Someday, he was sure to sell his own master out for thirteen coins of gold or commit some other equally grave sin.

And at the same time, Randgrof knew.

His father was a hero.

Someday, the people might well hail him as their one and only savior.

It could just as easily play out either way.

For that was the kind of person Aguina Elephabred was.

And that wasn't all. Aguina was a man saddled with a tremendous contradiction.

If he became a monster, he wouldn't regret a thing, and if he became a hero, he would take no pride in the fact.

Everything Aguina did, he did for his race. No matter what became of him, all that would remain was his anguish.

No amount of grieving, boasting, laughing, or crying would change who he was or what he needed to do.

Those words were straight from the horse's mouth. And Aguina was right.

None of that would've changed the aggregate amount of anguish he would have borne.

That was the thing Randgrof hated most about his father.

For he was wrong. Wrong beyond belief.

"Look, Father, if I may be so bold, all I wanted was to help you bear that anguish."

"Either that or for you to just be my father."

"You could've just not been an enemy of the world *or* a hero—and I'll confess, that's all there was to it."



"Nevermore."

Elisabeth called forth a massive raven.

Crimson flower petals and black darkness swirled through the air, and the ebony bird burst out of them with its lustrous wings spread wide.

As it glided forward, Elisabeth leaped astride it. However, the raven's nature was to be used for torturing people. It wasn't meant to be ridden. The bird let out a loud *caw!* of protest at the unexpected weight.

Fraught as her attempts at steering it went, Elisabeth did eventually manage

to get the raven under control.

After catching up to the summoned beasts by some miracle, she decelerated.

Eventually, she ended up side by side with her men, causing several of them to notice their captain's arrival. Some of them hung their ears, others balled up their tails, others still slouched awkwardly, and all of them averted their gaze.

Elisabeth was livid. They were in no position to go and pretend they hadn't seen her. In fact, she had half a mind to go kick some sense into them, but the other half just barely won out.

Instead, she cut through the thick air and made for the front of the pack. She pulled up alongside the fastest of the beasts.

"By the look on your face, you already know what a scolding you're about to get... Oy, Lute!"

"Captain Elisabeth!"

To her surprise, Lute gave her shout an immediate response. He turned and met her eyes.

Meanwhile, Randgrof continued clinging tight to his back. He clearly wasn't used to riding the summoned beasts, and his posture was downright precarious. Elisabeth's sleek black hair blew back in the wind as she glared at the two of them.

When she shouted, it was directed at them both.

"You're an absolute dunce! And that goes for you as well, Randgrof. What the hell do you two think you're doing?!"

"We're no dunces, I promise! Please, just hear us out!"

Surprisingly, the reply she got back was calm and collected. It seemed they had some sort of plan.

She frowned contemplatively, then went quiet for a bit.

As the silence wore on, the summoned beasts continued making their way onward. The sound of their spry footsteps overlapped with the noise of the flesh blob's writhing.

Lute hurriedly explained himself amid the ever-thickening fumes.

“With the Sand Queen’s original form, her ears were too far from the ground for us to try calling out to her! But now there’s a good chance that her entire body is like a big sensory organ! As Sir Aguina’s son, Sir Randgrof’s voice may well be able to get through to him! If nothing else, it’s worth trying!”

“You would try reasoning with that horror?! Aguina’s mind is broken! This is no time for naive hopes!” Elisabeth barked back.

At the moment, Aguina himself was the one forcing the Sand Queen’s corpse to undergo an even more profane transformation than it already had. The situation was far too grim to be expecting any miracles. However, Randgrof felt otherwise.

“I’m well aware of that! But the thing is, my father was obsessed with blood purity, and he lamented the future more than any other! It’s not his emotions I’m counting on—it’s his sense of reason and his broken thought processes!”

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes. It was true that Aguina was one of most fanatical blood purists there was. That was the whole reason he’d become an enemy of the world. It stood to reason that a pureblood voice—one that shared his own bloodline, no less—would carry special weight with him.

Even so, the odds of success were slim. Elisabeth started to go on.

“But, even so—”

“And more importantly, as things are, we’re of no use in the fight. So...this is fine,” Randgrof said firmly. He was prepared to place his own life on the scales of victory to try and tilt them in their favor.

Elisabeth narrowed her eyes once more. Randgrof had a point. She herself had realized the same thing.

The counterweights are practically weightless.

The Sand Queen’s body had melted away, and her new form was simply absorbing their poison arrows. There was nothing for the small folk to do. Lute and Randgrof were nothing more than powerless pawns, and in the grand scheme of things, *them dying would change nothing.*

In contrast, the Three Kings of the Forest were heavily wounded, and every bit of stamina they had to expend cost them dearly. There was value in having Lute and Randgrof put their lives on the line to test this idea of theirs. However, that was only true if the person performing the calculus had no feelings at all.

Elisabeth clamped her mouth shut, and when she opened it, it was the Torture Princess who spoke. “I’ve no intention of dying alongside you, you know.”

“Of course! We knew that all along, ma’am, and we leave the Fremd Torturchen to you!”

“And what do you intend to do about Ain? About your child?”

That question, however, came from *Elisabeth*. A certain rational goatwoman healer rose to the forefront of her mind, as did the eagerly awaited child now gestating in her womb.

Lute’s snout contorted in anguish. However, he glared forward with steel in his eyes. His gaze was fixed on the hideous flesh blob writhing before them. As he spoke, he pointed at the comprehension-defying quagmire of a battle raging on before them. “I’m sure Ain will understand. Well, no. She’ll be furious. But she’ll see why it was necessary. If that monstrosity is still here when the Fremd Torturchen arrives, our future will be consumed by darkness. And besides, it’s not just me. Sir Randgrof has a boy and a girl, too. We all do. Yet we came to this fatal battle anyway—to secure a future for those very same children.”

His words were foolish, there was no mistaking that. It was an absurd thing for someone as powerless as him to say. However, Elisabeth knew.

Most of their world’s people clung desperately to life in the ugliest way imaginable. Nobody wanted to die.

They would kill others, they would drench themselves in blood, and they would shout at the top of their lungs.

I don’t want to die *So you should die instead* You should die in my place / Someone other than me should die It was all perfectly illogical. However, the fact that the fear of death could overcome any and all morals was plain enough to see.

That was what had ultimately led to an avenger sitting in the judge's chair. Everything that had gone down had happened because of the three races' sins. Even in a world like theirs, though, there were still some people who were willing to throw themselves to the wolves in order to protect those who needed protecting.

Who could possibly mock resolve and determination such as theirs?

How could they, in a world where nobody wanted to die,

and where everything was loathsome,

and where people killed each other?

"That's right, we've made our choice!"

"We are the Peace Brigade, and it is our pride to serve at the pleasure of Lady Valisisa Ula Forstlast and Captain Elisabeth Le Fanu! We know what it is we need to protect!"

"Please, Captain, let us do this!"

This is our chance, her men pled desperately. It was aggravating, how shrewd their blunt sincerity could be. However, Elisabeth gritted her teeth. Her men had decided to do everything that was in their power. They'd chosen to fight to the bitter end.

That meant that this entire act

was *their* story.

Elisabeth pursed her lips. She cast her gaze downward and recalled something.

It was a thought she'd had some time ago.

The soldiers who'd survived Ragnarok seemed to carry a certain sense of guilt, and perhaps because of that, they were generally kind to her. However, Elisabeth had done her best to keep to herself. If she wanted to best protect the world, she knew it would be best to avoid nurturing new bonds.

There was no way of knowing whom or what she would eventually have to sacrifice.

Now, though, Elisabeth was struck with a bitter realization.

I was mistaken, completely and utterly.

Now, it was precisely *because* she was proud of them with all her heart that she was able to make the decision to send them to their deaths.

Elisabeth nodded—and her expression did a complete about-face.

The grin she wore now was majestic and cruel.

With it, she laughed off both their tragic resolve and her pained decision.

“Very well! If you wish it that dearly, then live as you please, and race on unfettered! Your death is yours to die! Now, be proud, for the Torture Princess rides with you, and laughs at any and all! Onward, I say, onward and onward and onward yet more! Even if none grant you leave, even if none recognize your deeds, follow your hearts and bet all you have on that slimmest of chances anyhow!”

“Of course, ma’am! As members of the Peace Brigade serving under Captain Elisabeth, we wouldn’t have it any other way!”

“The odds may be long, but we’ll be damned if we don’t beat them anyway!”

One after another, they drew their swords, and the sound of blades leaving sheaths filled the air. Elisabeth did likewise and drew Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal. The flesh blob turned its attention their way, but Elisabeth swung down her sword without a moment’s hesitation anyway. Lute took that as his signal, and he let out a battle cry.

“CHAAAAAAAAAAARGE!”

They all sped up.

Just as the boy who’d once waved his hand did.

All to protect those who needed protecting.



The flesh blob swung one of its arms.

The subordinate riding to Elisabeth’s right had his torso blown clean off.

Just like before, the flesh blob was practically toying with the Three Kings of the Forest. This time, though, it had turned a few of its arms on the Peace Brigade. The fleshy tentacles' insides were lined with teeth, and due to the speed they traveled at, merely so much as brushing up against them was enough to shave through the beastfolk's body with comical ease. Flesh and blood sprayed through the air. In the blink of an eye, it was over. By the time his insides started spilling out, the attack was already finished.

Organs tumbled out of his body as his lower half continued onward. However, his legs soon convulsed and sent him tumbling to the ground. Several of the others glanced over at the man who'd fallen victim, but none of them made to stop their summoned beasts. Elisabeth didn't so much as look back.

And thus, they rode on.

Another arm came their way.

This time, it was a sheep-headed soldier who was reduced to nothing more than meat. He was the one who'd once smiled cheerily and said, "We all know how much you love to eat!" Elisabeth would never get another chance to angrily threaten to dock his pay.

They would never laugh together or talk to each other again.

Even so, nobody stopped. If they stopped to scream, the dead would have died in vain.

So they all charged onward.

Charge, charge, charge, charge, charge, charge!

Don't look back. Cry not. Bear no regrets.

No miraculous salvation is coming. You chose this knowing that full well.

All you can do now is do what you resolved to do, even in the midst of hell.

A vast shadow loomed over Elisabeth and the Peace Brigade's charge.

They were getting closer to the flesh blob, and the arms—perhaps sensing danger—shifted up their pattern. They began obstinately focusing all their efforts on Elisabeth. New tentacles swooped in at her from all directions.

“You would aim at me, even unconsciously? Well, I daresay you’d best stop underestimating the Torture Princess!”

Elisabeth chopped off the arm straight ahead of her.

For the two arms behind her, she conjured up chains to dash them against the ground, then used her raven to dodge the myriad ones on her flanks. Her elaborate flight path caused the arms to all get tangled up in each other, and Elisabeth pulled well ahead of them.

“Gi..... Guuuuuu..... Uuuuuuuuuu.....”

As soon as she did, a bizarre voice rose up. Just like before, though, it quickly exceeded the range people could hear. Elisabeth looked and discovered that the flesh blob had caught the white deer right as the King was about to topple over. Waves of flesh undulated across the blob as it gradually ate away at its foe.

Elisabeth knew they couldn’t afford to forsake the white deer. She snapped her fingers and deployed a new spell.

“Cat’s Paw.”

Five eddies of crimson petals and darkness manifested in the air. A pointed, rake-shaped implement extended out from each one.

The implements got to work tearing at the flesh blob from all sides. Then they sank deep into its surface, and once they got far enough in, they froze in place and held the flesh blob still like a pair of forceps.

The white deer kicked desperately with its forelegs. Eventually, it managed to wriggle away from the blob.

Once it was free, the ancient wolf lashed out once more. It stuck its arm in the flesh blob’s newly opened section and used what remained of its bony fingers to scratch away at the blob’s insides. It was trying to find the blob’s mana reactor so it could puncture and destroy it.

The flesh blob struggled in what looked like agitation, and a moment later, a bombardment from the saints exploded across its surface.

Apparently, some of them were still up and fighting. Elisabeth was surprised;

she'd have thought that they'd have thrown in the towel by now. Given the animosity La Filsell had shown her, this was well outside her expectations. She muttered a few dazed words of praise. "I'm impressed you all would surpass your limits so..."

The flesh blob screamed and thrashed violently in agony.

That sent out a series of tremors. However, the Peace Brigade's summoned beasts managed to endure them. They swayed precariously but continued rushing onward nonetheless.

Taking care not to let any of its finger bones break, the ancient wolf mashed its arm in even harder.

Then

a muffled snapping sound rang out.

"What?"

"Don't let your guard down, you dimwit!"

Lute reacted with surprise, and Elisabeth let out a shout. Her aerial vantage point had let her see everything. The blob's arms had circled around the ancient wolf's back and pierced the King's chest through.

They writhed within the ancient wolf's body as though to return the favor. Then they ripped something out and cast it aside.

That something was the ancient wolf's still-beating heart. It toppled emphatically to the ground, crushing some ten beastfolk as it landed. Blood gushed from its arteries and ran between the trees. Ridiculously enough, the heart cast a glittering rainbow trail in the empty sky above it.

The ancient wolf looked up high to the heavens. They slowly lowered their gaze. The King surveyed the beastfolk around them. After casting an affectionate look at them, it apologetically closed its eyes.

One of the Kings was still now.

A scream rose up as the beastfolk collectively cried out. However, Lute and the others didn't grieve, and they didn't stop.

If anything, they did the opposite.

At this point, there was nothing they would pause for.

No matter what happened, they would never break their stride.



“Fan out!”

As the blob drew nearer, Lute raised his arm and gave an order.

The remaining twelve men quickly heeded it and split into four groups.

At the center of the four, Lute and Randgrof rode alone. Now that the arms had downed the ancient wolf, there were far more of them to spare. They lunged at Lute and the others, and Elisabeth pinned them down with her Cat’s Paws.

She had already burned through the majority of her mana reserves, so deploying a third torture device was out of the question. Instead, she summoned even more Paws. She knew that if their titanic foe managed to roll over on them, it would wipe them out.

By anchoring down the main body, the Torture Princess was able to hold the arms in place as well. However, several of the arms split off.

One particularly thick arm swung down toward Elisabeth.

“_____!”

There was no time to dodge, and it was too powerful to block.

Upon realizing that, Elisabeth focused her attention on the arm in front of her.

She held Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal aloft and plunged it into the arm. Then she forced her raven onward, carving through the fleshy arm from within.

“HraaaaaHHHHHHHHH!”

With that, she sliced the arm in twain vertically down the middle.

Venom spilled out and completely drenched her clothing. Her flesh burned as

she fell back. Ignoring the searing pain all across her body, she focused a healing spell on her lungs and her lungs alone. Then she turned her gaze back up.

There were other arms swinging at Lute and the rest as well. However, their aim was lacking.

The Peace Brigade nimbly steered their summoned beasts and dodged the blows. Once they did, though, one of the arms headed straight for Lute and Randgrof. It started picking up speed.

Then a sword sank into the arm with a *thunk*.

The black-and-white-spotted Brigade member had thrown his weapon, and the arm changed its target. The black-and-white-short-haired soldier was a man who prided himself on his composure. He murmured a quick beastfolk prayer. Then he went on. “Ah...damn it all. It looks like this is as far as I go. My apologies for jumping ship early.”

He gave them a weak smile. A moment later, his torso went flying off.

He would never get the chance to follow another order.

Elisabeth kicked aside the chunks of blob arm still lying on her. As she did, she saw more men die in her peripheral vision. Her bull-and goat-headed subordinates crumpled to the ground, summoned beasts and all.

Elisabeth totaled up the rest, her internal monologue practically a scream.

Only...nine remain!

She forced her raven to change course. They flew at a blistering clip.

By that point, Elisabeth had fully mastered how to manipulate her avian mount. She soared freely through the air, dancing circles around each of the arms and baiting—forcing—them to turn their focus on her.

Her young, coyote-headed subordinate with his distinctive notched ear couldn't help but let out a yelp. “Captain, you can't! It's too dangerous!”

“Look at me, I'm right here! Come and try me! Kill me, if you can! See if you can lay the Torture Princess low!”

Elisabeth flew, higher and higher and higher still. Waves of arms gave close

pursuit.

The fleshy tentacles surged at her as one. If they caught her, there would be no way for her to avoid being mashed into a pulp.

Then the Torture Princess snapped her fingers.

Cat's Paws collapsed down from both sides.

The Paws skewered the arms, piercing them all at once and shredding them to bits. Elisabeth took advantage of the opening that provided to descend so fast it looked like she was in free fall. She was out of peril, but getting there had required putting a tremendous strain on her body.

She vomited up the blood surging from her stomach, then brutishly wiped her mouth clean.

While the Torture Princess had been performing her death-defying dance, the Peace Brigade had continued their charge.

Just a little farther and they'd be at the flesh blob.

Its vile, pulsating form was right before them, dimly glowing and covered in blood and fat. Just its appearance alone was enough to inspire physiological revulsion in any and all who beheld it. However, Randgrof didn't falter.

Instead, he rose to his feet. It clearly took everything he had to maintain that unstable posture atop the summoned beast's back.

Then he called out.

"Father, please, hear me out! What you're doing won't save our people! Even if you massacre all the humans and beastfolk, all you'd be doing is leaving us for the Fremd Torturchen to slaughter! No one will survive! That's a fact, and if you'd come to your senses, you'd realize it! Listen to me, Father!"

And upon hearing his heartfelt, soulful cry,

the flesh blob froze for a second.

But only for a second.



The blob swung its arms even more violently than before. The sweeping blow

came hurtling toward the Peace Brigade.

With no time nor ability to stop on a dime, four more of them—including the youngster who'd just shouted—got reduced to carrion.

"Sure enough, there's no reasoning with it," Elisabeth muttered grimly.

As she did, she noted with some surprise the disappointment in her voice. Although she hadn't consciously realized it, apparently even the Torture Princess had been hoping for a miracle. In a sense, that just went to show how close they'd been.

The flesh blob had reacted. Randgrof's voice had gotten through.

It hadn't accomplished anything, but even just that much already bordered on miraculous.

Aguina was serving as the monster's mind, and by all rights, he shouldn't have been in any state to even process language. However, that wasn't how Randgrof had seen it. His expression was marked deep with dejection and despair.

Elisabeth decelerated, then turned toward him and shouted.

"Turn back, Randgrof! All you'll do now is throw away more lives! Turn back while you yet draw breath!"

"But, I'm not... I can't..." Randgrof hung his head. A moment later, though, he shook his head and fixed his gaze straight ahead. Then he took everyone by surprise by raising his voice and grabbing Lute by the collar. "I'm not finished yet!"

"Sir Randgrof, I say, what are you—? WHOA!"

"I'm fully aware of how rude I'm being! Forgive me!"

With that, Randgrof tossed Lute off their summoned beast's back and grabbed hold of the leather reins himself. However, he had no idea how to properly lead or direct the beast, so he simply resorted to kicking its side.

The beast began accelerating at breakneck speeds. Onward and forward Randgrof charged.

One of the arms lashed out at him, and he dodged it by the narrowest of margins. However, the next one came barreling at him head-on.

Elisabeth gallantly dived in front of it. Her corroded black hair fluttered behind her as she lopped the arm off. As she and Randgrof passed each other by, he gave her a shout. “You have my thanks!”

“If you wish to go, then go. ’Tis best to bear no regrets.”

She could have stopped him. However, she said nothing to that effect.

His charge was an act of supreme folly. All that awaited him at its end was death.

The Torture Princess knew that.

She knew, and she let him go anyway.

Elisabeth left Randgrof to gallop on away.

Randgrof didn’t fear that which awaited him. His own father was the man behind the Sand Queen’s transformation, and yet even so, there was no hesitation in Randgrof’s expression. It was as though he had always known that his father might someday become a monster. He raced all the way up to the flesh blob and drew his sword from its sheath.

Then he raised his arm aloft and hurled his sword at the blob.

“LOOK AT ME!”

The blade pierced the blob’s flesh. Blackened blood trickled down its length.

That was enough to get all the blob’s eyes to turn and look Randgrof’s way.

Despite the clear animosity he was facing it with, though, the flesh blob didn’t turn its arms on him. Instead, it froze again.

Elisabeth had trouble believing it until a certain morsel of information wormed its way out of the depths of her mind.

A tranquil song echoed in her ears.

—Her ever-closed eyes watch over her sheep

—Ensuring all her descendants are honest and true and good and resplendent

—Please, my queen, know it is true, believe in us as we believe in you

The blob is a monster that sees all, to be sure...

...but it was also an entity that cast judgment on all those it observed.

To wit, because the song influenced it and provided the inspiration for its transformation...

This was no miracle. Nothing of the sort. The monster had always retained both the ability to look at people and the intellect necessary to cast judgment on them. And Randgrof was no beastfolk.

He was an honest, true, good, resplendent descendant of the Sand Queen.

And on top of that, he was Aguina's son.

The flesh blob's eyes widened even further, then spun in their sockets. It didn't know what to do. Eventually, it decided to simply get out of Randgrof's way. It reached its arms toward the wounded white deer.

Before it had a chance to avert its gaze from him, though, Randgrof made his move.

He pulled something out from his pocket.

This time, Elisabeth felt as though she heard her own voice echo back in her ears.

“’Tis a wretched sight when one tries to kill themselves by blade and fails to finish the job.”

“I won't fail. What son of yours ever would?”

Randgrof laughed. He held his knife at the ready.

His hands were trembling.

“This is the one thing I can do to make sure you don't have to bear that anguish alone. Witness me, Father.”

And in one clean stroke,

Randgrof Elephabred slit his own throat open.



Blood gushed forth.

Some of it sprayed onto the Sand Queen.

The air froze.

Or at least, everyone there could have sworn it did.

The summoned beast shook its body. Randgrof's corpse, so sorrowfully light, tumbled to the ground. The Sand Queen immediately reached an arm out, catching his chest so gently and delicately it was almost funny. However, doing so caused the arm's teeth to damage it, spreading more and more blood across Randgrof's body.

Tears poured from each of the Sand Queen's many eyes.

She was grieving the death of an honest, true, good, resplendent descendant. Translucent droplets splashed against the ground.

As they did, the colossal hawk drilled its beak forward once more. However, the Queen ignored the attack against her person. Her body shook.

Then something rose up to its surface from within. A new transformation was taking place.

When she saw what was happening, Elisabeth gasped.

A key change had taken place in the flesh blob. Now a male figure was rising up on part of its surface. Based on the amount of mana contained within, Elisabeth immediately understood what had happened. The direct spiritual hit she'd suffered had caused the source of the Sand Queen's mana to change its shape and make an appearance.

Now the part of her she'd kept so deeply hidden away was out in the open.

The man-shaped core tried desperately to reach out its arms. However, it was unable to reach even the corpse immediately beside it.

Its hands drifted helplessly through the air. And that was when a bellow rang out.

"HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Lute rushed forward, shouting at the top of his lungs. He dashed at the flesh

blob with sword in hand.

It was a sad, pathetic attempt at a battle charge. Everything had happened so suddenly that Lute hadn't even had time to put together a plan. His mad dash had come far too late. The man was about to recede back into the fleshy depths, and that would spell their doom.

They were out of options—or so it seemed. But instead of faltering, Lute called out to Aguina.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you—we’re expecting.”

The man came to an abrupt stop. He looked back and forth between Lute and Randgrof’s corpse. In the end, his gaze settled on his son.

Lute’s blade drew ever closer to him. However, the man didn’t move. He just waited for the blow that would mark his execution. Lute continued onward toward his unmoving opponent. When he spoke next, there was no falsehood in his voice. “You prayed for us to be blessed with a healthy child, and that’s something I will never forget.”



The blade struck true.

Lute's slash cleaved the thing shaped like Aguina in half from top to bottom.

In that moment, the Queen's parts continued moving.

However, her reactor itself was destroyed.



That was too close for comfort, Elisabeth thought from atop her raven.

If she, the white deer, or the colossal hawk had tried to destroy Aguina, he merely would have retreated back into the blob. Just now, though, he had allowed the slash to cut him clean in two. And it was all because Lute was the one who'd called out to him.

They were both fathers, and that was what had sealed the deal.

The man-shaped figure trembled, then melted away.

All of a sudden, the flesh blob swelled up. Its skin grew taut, and blood vessels began bulging up on its surface.

This was different from the earlier transformations. This was a destructive growth—growth that signaled its demise.

Lute hurried back. However, he didn't make it in time, and one of his arms got caught in the expanding flesh. He struggled like his life depended on it. He even kicked and punched the flesh, but all that accomplished was getting one of his feet trapped as well.

Elisabeth forced her raven into a nosedive. If she used a Cat's Paw, she could cut around Lute and free him from the blob. She quickly conjured up a rope. It was the exact same trick she'd used back when Lute fell on his backside.

"You saved us!" she shouted. "Now, get on back here yourself, Lute!"

"Oh, what a shameful way for me to get caught!"

After sharing pretty much the exact same exchange they had earlier, Elisabeth wound the rope around his wrist. This time, though, a staggering amount of force yanked her forward. The intensity with which the flesh blob was trying to swallow Lute up was simply too great.

Elisabeth fell over, and the force from the impact caused her raven to crash-land. She found herself getting dragged toward the blob, so she plunged her sword into the ground in an attempt to resist.

However, the handle slipped out of her blood-slick grasp.

Lute stared at her. The blob had already swallowed half of his body.

A determined expression crossed his face, and he reached his arm out as far as it could go. Then, after snatching hold of the belt around Elisabeth's neck, he hurled her as far away as he possibly could.

It was like it was all some sort of gag.

"You! Utter! Fool!"

"I leave the rest to you, Madam...no, rather, Sir Kaito's beloved—as well as our beloved *Captain* Elisabeth!"

Lute spoke with a look of clear relief,

and just like that,

the flesh blob swallowed him up.



Elisabeth landed hard and tumbled violently across the ground. She quickly raised her wounded face and stared blankly at the scene before her. Like it or not, she could tell exactly what had happened.

My raven was swallowed up, too. I shan't have the mana to deploy any meaningful torture devices for some time.

In short, she had no way of saving Lute.

She dragged her venom-and crash-landing-battered body to its feet and began walking.

The retreat she was beating was a pathetic one hardly befitting the Torture Princess. But as she tripped over her own feet, she hurried on anyway. Even as she coughed up blood, she ran away like a woman possessed.

Those who owed their lives to another had a duty to fight.

Stopping and putting down her burden was an option denied to her.

Somehow or other, she managed to get out of range.

Her vision blurred as blood dripped down into her eyes. As she rubbed them the way a child would, she looked up and observed the flesh blob's final transformation.

The blob swelled and swelled and swelled, and, with a *pop*, it burst.

Afterward, all that remained was the foul sea of flesh expanding outward.



6

A Promise
to Play

F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e n

6

A Promise to Play

I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I was a bad girl I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm bad and wrong and I'm a spoiled little brat whose brain is more rotten than garbage, please don't hit me I'll do anything I swear so so?

I have to say *I'm sorry*.

Until they forgive me.

But see, there was one person who said I wasn't bad.

So I'm not scared anymore. You promised, remember? You said that I was your daughter.

That's right. There was someone who told me stories. Someone who stroked my hair.

But now there isn't.

Father died. Father was killed. Father asked me for something.

Please, daughter, carry out my dream for me.

I know. I know, you know? I know that really and truly, Father hated everything. He thought everything hurt, and everything was awful, and everything was horrible, and everything was scary. It's okay. Only I know. And I know that Father put up with it anyway. He endured for such a very long time.

So it's all right.

It's all right, right?

There was someone who loved me. There was someone who stroked my hair. There was someone who forgave me. He was the first person in all the world who did that. And this is what he wanted.

This is what I want.

So,

please, everyone, let's all please die together.



There was a place, and in that place, there was a peerless sinner.

She tortured the entire population of her fiefdom and killed them. In the end, her sins reached even the nobles.

Everyone cast stones at her. They resented, hated, and despised her.

Loathsome Elisabeth, repulsive Elisabeth, cruel, hideous Elisabeth!

A curse upon you, a curse upon you, a curse, a curse, an eternal curse upon you, Elisabeth!

It made complete sense. No matter how many good deeds she racked up, it meant nothing to the dead.

No day would ever come where her sins would be washed clean.

But there was a boy who told her he loved her,

and a simple beastman who called her his beloved captain.

They didn't call the Torture Princess "the Torture Princess."

To them, the Torture Princess was just Elisabeth.

And now

both of them were gone.

In the grander scheme of things, it meant nothing.

That was all that the story had to it.



Elisabeth slowly sat up.

Her body was in pretty rough shape. Due to the venom, her body was corroded all over. Her skin was covered in open wounds, and her black hair lay in uneven tatters. All of her usual beauty had been marred with injuries.

Furthermore, her mana reserves were greatly diminished. Fortunately, she had enough left to support her demon meat-infused body, but that was all. Compared to the mana she normally had at her disposal, she was all but running on empty.

It was almost like that time in the Capital, right after she'd finished defeating the three merged demons.

This time, though, things were different. This time, there were people she knew among the fallen.

Over half of the people who'd looked up to her had perished. However, that wasn't for the Torture Princess to lament. She had no right to value some of the dead more than others. Knowing that, she allowed herself one small utterance. "Ha, some heartless killer I turned out to be. I couldn't even kill the one who needed killing on my own."

After a few moments of silence, Elisabeth spat out the chunk of flesh lodged in her throat. During her flight, she had accidentally bit the inside of her mouth. She silently looked at the sky.

The Sand Queen was dead. Off in the distance, Elisabeth could hear the white deer and colossal hawk wailing. Both of them had survived. However, it was unclear whether or not they would recover from their wounds. The beastfolk joined their lament. They had enough sorrow to go around.

Then Elisabeth heard her name.

"Captain Elisabeth!"

"Are you all right, Cap...tain?"

It was her surviving men. The four haggard beastfolk rushed over to her, but when they saw the state she was in, her subordinates went silent. They exchanged glances with each other.

When they spoke next, it was all at once, and with renewed passion.

""""We won, Captain Elisabeth!""""

"We did it... We did it! With this, those we lost will have their reward. Hold your head high, ma'am. We fought, and we won. Surely this is an occasion for

joy.”

Their voices rang with enthusiasm, but Elisabeth could tell. The things they were saying weren't coming from the heart. They were just trying to cheer her up.

It made her wonder—up until then, had she ever been in as sorry a state as she was at the moment?

And at the same time, there was something she was painfully aware of.

The dead receive no reward.

Once someone died, that was it for them. Absolute as that truth was, though, Elisabeth didn't give voice to it.

There were things the dead had accomplished, and that fact was just as irrefutable. Denying that aspect of it would do nothing to change what had happened. Also, Elisabeth wasn't nearly so tactless as to shut down her subordinates when they were going out of their way to try to encourage her.

And even if she was, *there was no time*

She looked straight forward and brought up a different topic altogether. “The Three Kings should still be able to serve as shields... You lot, take the beastfolk and demi-human survivors and have the Kings give you cover as you flee. Go now, and don't tarry.”

“What? Captain, what's going on? Using the Three Kings of the Forest as shields... What are you talking about?”

“If the attacks come, they're the only ones who'll be able to protect you! Enough questions, just go!” Elisabeth shouted.

Her flustered subordinates sprang into action, following her orders and passing the message along to what remained of the army. The four of them were skilled professionals. They would be able to get the survivors to safety.

Instead of watching them go, Elisabeth glared at the ground.

There was a rose blooming atop it—a peculiar little flower interspersed with azure and crimson petals both.

Clear droplets sat atop it like little tears. Then the petals all fell off, as though the flower had used up the last of its strength. The bits of azure and crimson rose drifted slowly toward the ground, then melted away before they could land.

Elisabeth knew. Like it or not, she understood exactly what it meant.

It meant the Saint was dead.

The Torture Princess's crimson eyes darkened, and she let out a low murmur.

"Despair is on the move."

Her voice rang with ridicule,

as though mocking herself for expecting anything more of the world.



Deep in an abyss at the World's End,

the Saint died by Alice's hand. However, the Saint's quick defeat hadn't been caused by her own strength running out.

There was a different reason behind it.

Now, after the fact, Elisabeth realized what that was.

The Sand Queen was a corpse, and corpses couldn't feel pain. But feel it or not, the wounds inflicted on her flesh were converted into pain anyway. And all of it, along with all the pain she inflicted on others, was transmitted right on over to Alice, and it had caused Alice's power to grow tremendously.

Not only was the Sand Queen a powerful weapon, she had also served as a trap.

By fighting her, Elisabeth and the others had been all but strangling the Saint themselves.

Still, there was no other way.

The three races had no strength to spare. If they hadn't dealt with the Sand Queen, the blow she would have dealt them would have been lethal.

Furthermore, Alice was always going to show up sooner or later, and there

was no way they could've taken on her and the Sand Queen at the same time. Even as things actually played out, there was a good chance they would've lost if not for Randgrof and Lute. However...

...the fact remains that a person died because of what we did.

That tragic woman hadn't even given them her name.

Had better options been available to them? There was no way of knowing.

Elisabeth shook her head. She gave her fingers a harsh snap—in part to clear her mind—and drew Executioner's Sword of Frankenthal from the air once more.

She thrust its blade into the ground to help herself rise to her feet. Then she heard a new pair of voices calling her from behind.

"Madam Elisabeth!"

"You're in an even worse state than I expected. **Don't you go keeling over on me now, girl.**"

Izabella and Jeanne rushed over to her. Their *Waltz* was a technique designed for fighting in close quarters, so they would have been poorly matched against the flesh blob. Upon determining that, Elisabeth had chosen not to call on their aid during the battle. Now that she looked at them, though, she noticed that both of their mana reserves were a bit lower than she'd expected. On top of that, they were both splattered with blood.

It begged the question—why? Izabella was quick to explain. "A couple of the saints hit their limits during that last bombardment. We immediately teleported them out and gave them emergency treatment, but their conditions are still critical. Jeanne and I gave them blood and mana transfusions, and that was enough to get them stable, but still... But then! Just now there was a rose!"

"Ah, I see... You got one, too, then," Elisabeth replied to Izabella's puzzled outburst. By the sound of it, a rose had sprouted at her location, too. The Saint must have wanted to inform Izabella of her death as well.

Elisabeth brushed her shredded black hair back off her shoulder. Her finger grazed the bit of white bone peeking out from her jaw.

Still looking like death on two legs, she closed her eyes. She thought back over all the stories Alice had told her up until then. As she ruminated on the scattered bits and pieces she knew about the Wonderland tale, she realized something.

Our game with the Queen is over. Now the protagonist—Alice—will make her return.

Alice knew exactly how the Sand Queen fought, and she probably knew exactly where she was, too. There was no doubt in Elisabeth's mind that Alice would make her way to the same spot, destroying towns and villages on her way like she was skipping stones.

Alice was pure and innocent, and she'd been fixated on Elisabeth for some time now. There was no reason to assume that had changed. In short, she was going to show up at any moment. Knowing that, Elisabeth did something very unlike her and opened her mouth up wide.

Her voice rang beautiful and sonorous as she recited the poem she'd since memorized.

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall! Humpty Dumpty had a great fall!

"All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again."

There was something that couldn't be put back together.

Something broken that was coming their way.



To. Fro. Chitter. Chatter.

There were voices.

Throngs of people sobbing and screaming and trembling. Someone was loudly screaming. Their voice rang with terror. Someone else lamented the incoming calamity, their tone that of a person dashing through a field with deranged abandon and laughing their head off. "It's the end of days all over again."

And there, in that place that seemed halfway between a nightmare and reality, a young girl appeared.

She spoke with a voice like an angel's.

"Come now, let's be good girls and sing a song.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!"

That mysterious monster, surely, had to be Alice herself.

Sara Yuuki had become Alice, and now she was the Jabberwock.

Right as the observation began tickling Elisabeth's brain, Alice landed and did a little twirl. She stopped singing and faced Elisabeth. The white rabbit-ear-like ribbons attached to her oversized hat swayed from side to side.

Just like Alice had once before, she bent one knee and gave Elisabeth an elegant curtsy.

"Welcome, Elisabeth. Welcome to Wonderland."

It was an odd thing for her to say. After all, she was the person who'd arrived latest out of anyone there. Yet she said it loudly and proudly. Alice was there, and that was what made it Wonderland. She raised her voice.

"Come on, Elisabeth! Let's play!"

She sounded positively bubbly.

It was like she didn't have a care in the world.

Elisabeth pursed her lips at the irony of it all. Then she replied in a voice heavy with exhaustion. "Is that truly what you want? To destroy the world?"

Alice blinked at the question. Drops of blood trickled down her eyelashes.

Due perhaps to some odd fastidiousness of hers, her hair, hat, and ribbons were as white as ever. However, the rest of her body was drenched in the Saint's blood. The crimson little girl gave the question some serious thought.

Eventually, she came up with an answer. "There's nothing I myself want to do, no. Nope, not a single thing. The one thing I want is to carry out Father's wish. But...there is one thing I want to ask, maybe."

Alice looked straight at Elisabeth, and Elisabeth found herself reflected in the girl's ruby eyes.

Eventually, Alice hacked her question up like so much blood. “Why should I have to be the only one who loses Father? Kaito Sena’s Elisabeth is still alive, isn’t she?!”

The pained question hung in the air. Alice spread her arms out wide. She was facing the Torture Princess, but the question wasn’t directed at Elisabeth. Alice had directed it at Kaito Sena, or perhaps even at the world itself.

“Why me?! We’re the same, we’re both reincarnations! We both came from another world! So why?!”

Her face contorted like she was about to cry. However, the very question was absurd. Those weren’t the words of someone trying to destroy the world. Plus, the fixed batteries had been reincarnations as well, and that hadn’t stopped her from using them the way she had.

But whether Elisabeth wanted to or not, she understood. This wasn’t about sin and punishment.

Alice is... Sara Yuuki is but a child.

Her death had filled her with a profound hopelessness, but it was still unclear how well she understood just how tragic her life had truly been. Despite the deep void in her heart, most of what she’d done and said had been happy.

In all likelihood, Alice had *honestly enjoyed herself*.

It was just like how Kaito Sena had found a family in his new world.

She, too, had found a father. She had found someone who loved her.

But now he’s gone.

Lewis was dead. Alice was alive.

That cruel truth was her everything.

And Elisabeth realized something. Sure enough, the reason for Alice’s animosity toward the world was the simplest thing imaginable, yet was rooted in a heavy truth.

“Someone she wished was alive had been killed.”

That, as always, was what gave rise to the flag called revenge.

However, Alice wasn't the only one who'd lost people.

'Tis but a tale from long, long ago.

Once upon a time, there was a boy who was brutally killed by another and a monster who brutally killed others.

Or perhaps there was a child who was abandoned by his parents and a sinner who was abandoned by the world.

Then the child disappeared.

Only the sinner remained.

"I am your reverse, then. Kaito Sena did not lose Elisabeth, true. But I lost Kaito Sena. The child is gone, and the monster remains alone. And yet, even so. He tried to protect everything, so I have a duty to protect it in his...stead. Ah. So... So that's it." Elisabeth trailed off. Another realization had just dawned on her.

Perhaps...we're the same.

Alice was trying to carry out Lewis's wish.

And Elisabeth was trying to protect those who Kaito had left behind.

That was all. They were the same, she and her. The only difference was whether the person they cared about had loved the world or hated it. And unlike Alice, Elisabeth realized something.

By now, there was nobody left who knew how they had spent their days. But the sinner was fine with that.

No matter what happened, no matter how tough things got, she was fine with that.

The sinner and the boy used to be together.

That was enough for her.



"In short, what I'm saying is—your grief means nothing to me."

"...Is this some sort of joke?"

Alice's red eyes went wide at Elisabeth's reply, and the force from the mana surging within her caused her white hair to floof outward. One of the blood drops that fell off her took on the shape of a small mouse, and it looked up at Elisabeth with a sleepy-looking grin.

However, the Torture Princess was unmoved. She stomped the mouse flat.

"I assure you, it isn't. Go on, look back. Just once will do. You've piled up mountains of corpses and inflicted pain upon countless people. If anyone has a right to call this situation nonsensical, surely it's those you've made victims of."

"See, I knew you were joking. Why, what could it have been but a joke?"

Elisabeth was all too aware that in Alice's eyes, there was nothing wrong with what Lewis had asked her to do. She simply had no grasp of the gravity of the sins she was committing. She was pitiable, in a sense, but there was no way to save her now.

In all likelihood, Alice herself probably didn't even want to be saved. There was only one person who had ever loved and accepted her. Maybe she could have found more, but at this point, Alice would probably deny the possibility if anyone pointed it out to her.

Knowing that, Elisabeth's tone remained cold. "I shall say one more thing, then. You said that you and he were 'the same,' but what similarities can you even claim to have? What of this world did you ever love? What did you protect? No, 'tis you and I who are the same. But Kaito Sena is different. He tried to protect everything. He loved everyone, knowing full well how foolish it was to do so. Why, he gave himself up to save a wretch like me. You are nothing like that fool, and I shan't suffer you to say otherwise."

"Oh, is that so? I wasn't even given a *chance* to save Father. So you've got a lot of nerve, ma'am. We're the exact same, can't you see?! Elisabeth, Kaito Sena, and I—we're all the same!"

All of a sudden, Alice's voice rose to a bellow. Tears streamed from her eyes, but it wasn't sadness that colored her expression. It was plainly rage. She was putting her hatred toward the world on display for all to see.

She cried harder and harder as she went on. "Our fates were a little different,

that's all! You could have become just like I did! So...so why? Why should I be the only one who has to suffer?! Why?! Why?!"

Elisabeth nodded. "True enough. You represent a future that could well have been ours, I grant you that."

There was a certain logic to Alice's claim. If Elisabeth had died for nothing, Kaito Sena might have come to hate the world as well—and that went doubly so if Hina hadn't been around.

Plus, the same could be said of Elisabeth, too. Who knows what she might have done if Kaito had died cursing the world.

It was as one would their confidante, or their brother, or their savior.

As one would a kind, incorrigible fool—

As one would any whom they ought to love—

Elisabeth Le Fanu loved Kaito Sena.

And Alice Carroll loved Lewis.

Hers was another form Kaito and Elisabeth might have taken.

And yet, even so...

"Don't you dare dream that your pain serves as justification for those you're trying to kill."

I'm hurting *So I'm going to kill you* I'm hateful *I'm going to kill you* I'm sad / Kill you By all rights, that line of reasoning was unforgivable. Elisabeth brandished her sword.

"Cease in this path of yours. Elsewise, I shall slay you."

Alice gave her a majestic smile. Elisabeth laughed right back at her. Then a duo of silver and gold took their places by her side. It was Izabella and Jeanne. The two of them moved in to help keep Elisabeth's battered body upright.

"Don't forget, we're here as well."

"That we are. **Win or lose, this here's our fight, too.**"

The two of them were no match for Alice. However, neither Izabella nor

Jeanne showed any signs of backing down.

The three of them and the Fremd Torturchen squared off.

And when they did, a stillness descended that seemed to last for an eternity.



Eventually, Alice broke the silence. She spoke softly. “That’s very bold of you. You know you’re weaker than me. Bold indeed, I say.”

“Aye,” Elisabeth replied. “We are weak. But if we fail to stop you, ’twill be our heads that roll. That’s all there is to it.”

“I suppose you’re right. You’re doing the same thing I am.”

Alice gave them a cherubic smile and crossed her hands behind her back.

Then she gave her head a little tilt, swaying from side to side as she went on in a singsong voice. “I’m going to kill you and lop your sinful heads right off. I’ll make rivers of blood and mountains of bodies and burn everything to ash. And once I’m done killing...I’m going to go smash Kaito Sena’s crystal.”

Alice opened her red eyes disconcertingly wide. However, her gaze itself was serene and unclouded.

The look in her eyes was fair, but the words coming from her mouth were anything but.

“Kaito Sena has God and Diablo in him, but... But I don’t need them as a deterrent anymore. So the best thing to do is to break them. And when Kaito Sena dies, the world will come to an end. What do you think, Elisabeth? Doesn’t that sound lovely?”

“You plan on destroying the crystal, releasing God and Diablo, and bringing about the reconstruction? How very efficient of you.”

Elisabeth simply gave Alice’s suggestion the nod. There was no denying it—if she wanted to destroy the world, that was the logical way to go about it. Alice went on with great delight.

“I even know where the crystal is already. You either put it back at the World’s End or you moved it to your castle, right? It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me. Wherever it is, I’ll destroy it.”

“’Tis at the World’s End, in the cave where Ragnarok was fought. I returned it from whence it came.”

“Goodness me, how forthcoming you’re being. Very well. Whether you’re lying or telling the truth, it’ll all end the same way.”

“One thing, though, Alice. You say you intend to enact slaughter on a grand scale. How about we play a game first?” Elisabeth asked offhandedly. Alice squinted at her.

Then she laughed, as though mocking Elisabeth for even suggesting such a thing. She replied haughtily and with as sinister of an expression as could be. “But I just have to kill you and everyone else, Elisabeth. You’re not even the Queen of Hearts, and you think you have the right to challenge me to a game?”

“I do. For I intend to bet my whole self. For Kaito’s sake, I cast myself onto the scales. Are you so base as to ignore such an act? O daughter of Lewis?”

One of Alice’s eyebrows sprang up. She put a stop to the spell she was about to unleash.

Then she asked Elisabeth to elaborate.

“All right, then... Tell me the rules. I’ll hear you out, Elisabeth.”

“I shall be the White Rabbit. You shall be Alice. Your goal is to pursue me. I, and I alone, shall fight you all the way to the World’s End. If I kill you on the way there, the win is mine. If you kill me and reach the crystal, the win is yours. In exchange, though, you shan’t lay a hand on another living soul.”

“Ah, I see. Well, that’s fine. I’ll just kill them later. What about the people who help you, though?”

“...Any who choose to involve themselves of their own volition are fair game. If you wish to kill them, then so be it. But you have to agree to leave everything else until afterward.”

That was the promise Elisabeth hoped to get out of Alice. And there was a pressing reason behind her proposal.

Once Alice began her massacre, the world was done for. The Fremd Torturchen had finally become everything Lewis had hoped she would. It was

similar to what would happen if Kaito Sena had wanted to destroy the world. Alice might not have been quite on his level, but what she'd been on the verge of starting was certainly in the same ballpark.

For now, Elisabeth needed to delay Alice's rampage for as long as she could.

"As the Torture Princess, I've gone all in—how could the Fremd Torturchen possibly reject my wager?"

"All right, Elisabeth. If you're willing to insist that hard, I'll play with you. I do want to give you an extra-special death, after all. For starters, you should go on back to the Capital—and when the time comes, I'll chase you."

And with that, Alice accepted Elisabeth's invitation to the stage.

Then she vanished.

Leaving behind nothing but a promise to play a twisted game.



Alice was gone. All that remained where she'd stood was a vast, devastated wasteland.

Elisabeth let out a small exhale. She surreptitiously wiped away her sweat.

That was close... It could all have ended right then and there.

She was running on empty at the moment, and Izabella and Jeanne didn't stand a chance against Alice on their own. If Alice had killed Elisabeth, then turned her attention to the others—Izabella and Jeanne, the beastfolk, the Three Kings of the Forest, and the backup saints—and began her slaughter, they would all have been done for. The mere fact that Elisabeth had managed to secure that promise from her had been a stroke of good fortune.

If nothing else, they had gained the new leeway that the game afforded them. At the same time, though, all that had done was delay their execution.

Jeanne narrowed her eyes a bit, then tilted her head with the same expressionless look on her face as always. "What are you up to, you inscrutable lady? **Buyin' us time ain't gonna be enough for us to take Alice down. It doesn't make much difference *when* we get smoked, you feel me? You got some sorta idea cookin' in that head of yours?**"

“Nay. But in a way, you could say I do.”

It was kind of an absurd thing for Elisabeth to say, given the imminent peril they were in. The women of gold and silver exchanged a glance.

Elisabeth squeezed her eyes shut, then opened them back up.

The words were all but impossible to believe in.

At the moment, there were so few sureties in that world of theirs.

Justice had perished long ago. Nothing was truly “good.” Everyone was flying the flag of revenge. Places all over had been turned into hells on earth. It was so impossibly hard to find anything worth believing in.

And yet even so, Elisabeth spoke.

“That woman told me Kaito Sena’s True Message.”

The Saint had stubbornly refused to give them her name. In the end, she’d only opened her mouth a single time more.

And from her soft lips, the True Message had come.

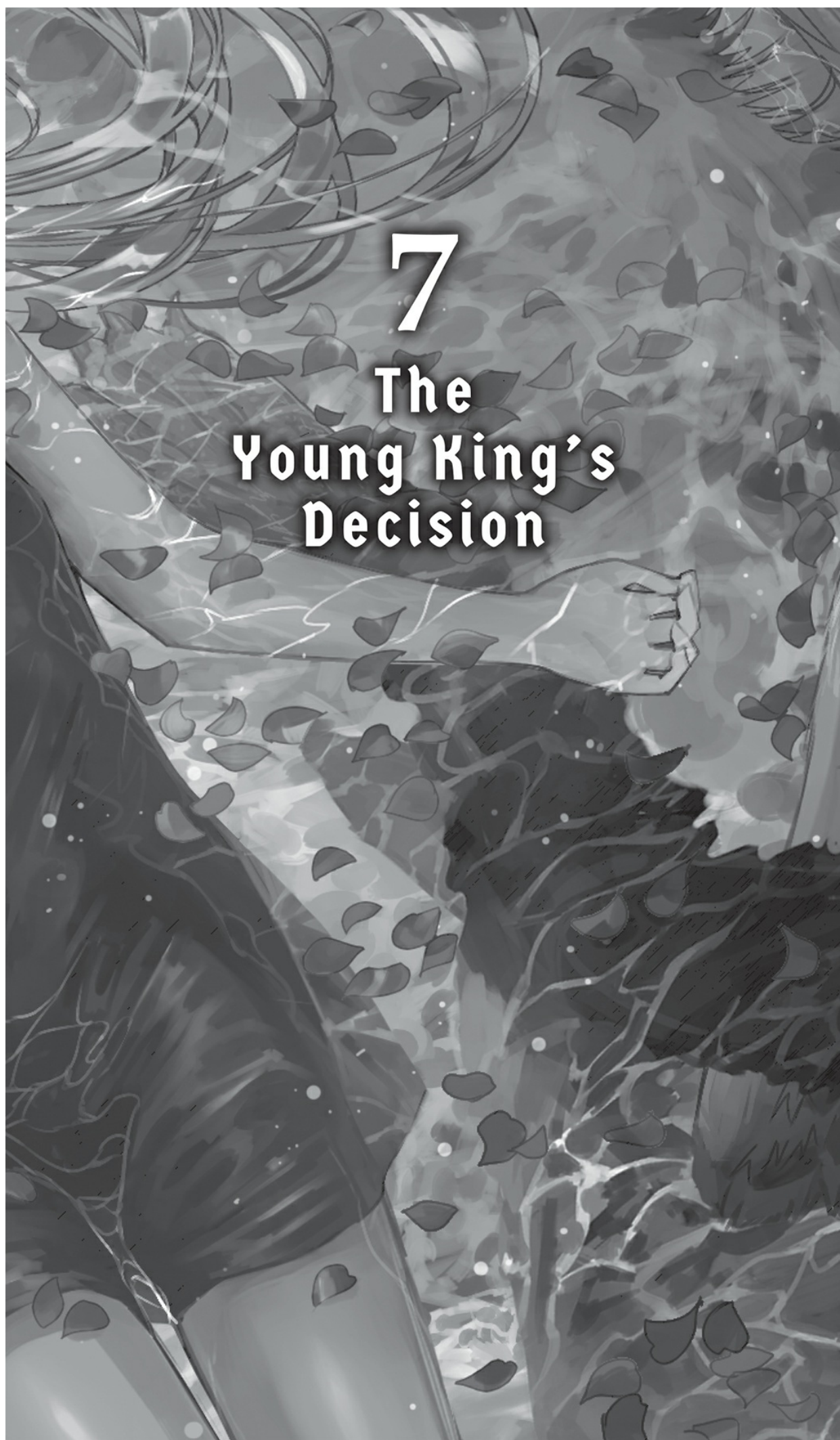
The Torture Princess relayed it.

““Do whatever you can to buy some time. Even a little will do.””

Just a little longer, Elisabeth.

The words were clumsy, and they were fleeting,

but at the same time, they represented a definite source of hope.



7

The Young King's Decision

F r e e m d T o r l o r c h e n

7

The Young King's Decision

It's time for a story about a boy.

The boy was a sad little person. He was timid, and cowardly, and gloomy to boot.

Normally, it was hard for people like that to live exciting lives. However, this particular boy had been born as the heir apparent to the human throne. Although he himself never wished for anything of the sort, he was forcibly coronated and made to serve as king by those around him. On top of that, the boy didn't have a single person who believed in him. As he lived his solitary life, he ultimately made the choice to give in to his destiny.

In the world, there was a single nitwit of a king.

With great resignation, the boy chose to live a life that would be mocked in just that way.

But the world betrayed that expectation,
and the boy's destiny was radically transformed.

It's time for a story of a hero.

The world once very nearly met a tragic end. However, that seemingly immutable fate was altered by a single person. And the one who accomplished that miraculous feat was a boy who had reincarnated from another world.

He got a chance at life, then had a number of experiences, some horrifying and some irreplaceable.

Then after a long series of battles, he obtained a colossal amount of mana and used it to save someone precious to him.

And while he was at it, he saved the world.

By sacrificing himself.

After burdening himself with God and Diablo, the boy fell into a deep slumber at the World's End. Thanks to his deeds, the people of the world managed to avoid the apocalypse. The greatest good for the greatest number was, surely, the greatest outcome.

One could say they lived happily ever after.

As an aside, there was also one little fact. Hardly any knew it, and it was of little true importance.

As it turned out, though, the boy—the human king—admired the hero deeply. Thus did the story of admiration and folly and love come to its end.

And with it, for the first time, the story of Maclaeus Filliana the Craven King began.

“It was the first time I ever had something I wanted to become. It was the first time I'd ever admired someone like that.”

“It was the first time I realized that it didn't matter that no one else believed in me.”

“I just had to become someone that I could believe in.”



“We don't have any problems with you buying time on your own. If anything, I think it's admirable.”

“But we're not about to sit here and let you choose the crystal as the finish line for your game!”

“The same goes for that drivel from the Mad King! Who would ever be willing to put their faith in something so vague?!”

“And how the hell could you let her set the Capital as your starting line?!”

A chorus of angry shouts echoed through the provisional royal castle.

After the battle against the Sand Queen and her encounter with Alice, Elisabeth had returned to mankind's territory.

Once she got there, she gave her report about the promise that had been made. The reactions she got were about what she'd expected. As everyone dumped their verbal abuse on the Torture Princess, Elisabeth shook her head. It was all very grating on her ears.

She knew that all their complaints were legitimate, but at the same time, she didn't hear any of them offering up better alternatives.

After all, there wasn't a single person in the world who could take Alice in a fight.

If they wanted a different method, though, Elisabeth herself had long since thought of one.

We could simply let Alice carry out her massacre.

Then, while she was preoccupied, Elisabeth would take Kaito Sena's crystal and hide it as well as she could. From there, all they would have to do was wait with bated breath for that "just a little longer" to pass. Compared to Elisabeth's game, that method would provide far greater security for the crystal and make averting total destruction that much easier. However, it also carried the serious possibility that by the time the end came, humanity would have suffered too great a blow. Even if some form of salvation were to come, it would be pointless if most of the people receiving it were already dead.

And what's more, there's no telling what state God is in over Kaito's body. 'Tis crucial we consider the possibility that if the destruction crosses a certain threshold, it will commence with the reconstruction... And even if it doesn't wake, the rebuilding efforts to come will demand considerable manpower. Even if the mother yet lives, a world without children has no future.

Either way, they had no choice but to trust Kaito Sena's words.

And if they wanted to take the option that prevented a massacre from occurring, offering the crystal up as a prize would be an essential part of that.

After all, that was the bait they needed to get Alice to come running. From there, all they could do was buy as much time as possible before Alice reached it. That said, Elisabeth was going to have a hard time pulling that off on her own.

Still, she couldn't exactly just go up and ask others for help. Any who took part in this upcoming battle would be heading to their deaths. There wasn't a soul who stood a chance against Alice, and that was even before taking the Sand Queen's battle into account.

As the voices of dissent filled the air, Elisabeth quietly spoke. "I hear no alternate suggestions, so this is the way it shall be. Now, I can't promise any will survive, but...if there are any who would be willing nonetheless, I beseech you to lend me your aid. As for everyone else, I recommend you find somewhere you can hide in utter silence."

Elisabeth had more or less resolved to fight this battle alone. At the moment, her mana reserves had largely recovered. Her encounter with the Grand King had led her to start keeping stockpiles of her own blood, and the transfusion had worked wonders.

Now that she could stand on her own two feet again, she had no intention of lambasting any who chose to flee.

She owed her life to Kaito Sena. His love had saved her.

That meant that all of this, everything that was happening and everything that was going to happen, was her story.

Averting her eyes and passing the buck wasn't an option.

Silence descended on the room. However, there was one person who moved. It was the human king—Maclaeus.

He solemnly rose to his feet, then laid a hand atop his chest and spoke. "Anyone who wants to run should run. The Fremd Torturchen will probably come to the castle first, so I'm going to stay here. That way, I'll be able to send out evacuation orders as Alice and Madam Elisabeth fight. I can handle communications on my own, so by all means, if you want to go, then go."

"Maclaeus?"

Elisabeth looked at him in astonishment. It was true enough the kingdom of man could replace their leader with little trouble.

There were plenty of other people who could serve as king. Back during

Ragnarok, though, the Craven King had fled. By all rights, Maclaeus should've been more scared of what was going on than anyone. Elisabeth shot him a questioning glance. *Are you sure about this?*

However, he didn't answer her.

That in and of itself was his answer.

There was no need for him to put it into words. Maclaeus had steeled his resolve. He squeezed his fists tight in a way that looked almost childish, then raised his voice. "Last time, I ran away. I'm done running now. I'm not going anywhere, even if it means I have to stand here alone."

The king's declaration echoed across the room. His entourage of high priests and influential nobles exchanged glances with each other. Izabella said nothing. Somebody tried to break the silence, but they were quickly interrupted.

The door to the conference room swung open with great force.

Heavy footsteps boomed out in concert with a soldier's voice.

"That's just what we've been waiting to hear."



"Royal Knight Commander Darius!" Izabella cried.

Elisabeth blinked. The Royal Knights were a knight order ranked below the Holy Knight paladins, and this was Elisabeth's first time crossing paths with their commander.

The man Darius was about as ordinary-looking as they came. He was a gruff, bearded soldier, and though his physique was rugged, Elisabeth couldn't sense an ounce of magical potency in him. Even so, just looking at him was enough to get a sense of what an impressive military career he must have had. Darius went and stood beside Izabella.

He placed his arm over his chest and bowed, then grimly laid out the facts. "We saw those fixed batteries, so we know that the situation is as bad as it was during the end of days. But this time, the Mad King isn't here, and I'm not about to send my men out to fight under the orders of a man who isn't giving it his all. Not when we all know they'd be going to their deaths. But just now, we heard

your resolve loud and clear.”

All of a sudden, Elisabeth realized that the hallway outside was packed full of Royal Knights.

It was unclear how long they’d been there, but by the sound of it, they’d been eavesdropping on the meeting. The guard outside must have been complicit, too. It was a bald-faced act of treason on all of their parts, but given the current circumstances, it was best not to get hung up on little details like that.

Darius’s well-worn armor clinked as he took a few steps forward.

Then he knelt before Maclaeus. The young king hadn’t been expecting that, and he let out a small gasp. Darius bowed low and spoke with great reverence. “It will be our honor to accompany you, Your Majesty. Please, King Maclaeus, hold your head high. Each and every one of us is ready to stand here until the last man for you.”

Cheers rose up from behind him. That was what the knights had been looking for—a reason to stand fast and fight. They were being faced with a calamity on par with the end of days, and all they’d been hoping for was someone to show up and lead them. They raised their fists high.

One after another, the knights let out shouts of approval.

That marked the moment that Maclaeus the Craven, the worst king in history, was recognized by the army as a leader worthy of succeeding the Mad King.

“I...”

Tears started beading up in the corners of Maclaeus’s eyes. Before they could fall, though, he quickly wiped them away. As he did, one of the high priests nodded. It was the old man who had asked why Elisabeth couldn’t have been the one to die. At some point, a small, glowing dove had appeared in his hand.

The creases in his face wrinkled as he quietly spoke. “I see. In that case, I suppose there’s no helping it... King Maclaeus, I have a message for you from the saints. There is the sin of La Filsell to consider, the one who reacted with hostility to the prospect of having her contract with God severed and attacked Madam Jeanne. But more importantly, they wish to honor La Christoph’s vision

of salvation and Her Holiness the Saint's noble sacrifice. As such, all of them are prepared to fight and die alongside the Torture Princess."

"The...*saints* are?"

The Torture Princess was shocked. That wasn't the choice she'd expected them to make at all.

For most of the saints, their prayers had ultimately warped even their very flesh. God was all they had. And even though it wasn't the issue at hand, Elisabeth's eventual goal was to remove them all from God's influence. They should have viewed her as an enemy. But now they were choosing to help protect the world. Then the high priests all moved as well.

They dropped to their knees as one and clasped their hands together as though in prayer. "The saints' resolution is firm. As such, we shall martyr ourselves before that same fate."

"You lot, too?"

It was only then, at long last, that Elisabeth realized something. All of them, the old man included, really were high priests.

Beside them, the aristocrats straightened their posture. Then they all heard a flustered voice from outside.

"Whoa, why's it so packed out here? I could smell the sweat from down the hallway!"

The voice belonged to one of the civil officials who'd been waiting by the communication devices.

For some reason, there was something almost goofy about his tone.



The official waded through the sea of men and barged into the room once more. This time, there was a communication device perched atop his shoulder. He pointed at the white orb and shouted excitedly.

"Madam Elisabeth! The device followed along of its own accord, but the point is, you have a message from Sir Vyadryavka! It goes, 'Our retreat was successful. We owe you a great debt, Madam Elisabeth. We know Alice Carroll

has awoken, and we're in the process of reassembling the army to come to your assistance.'"

"You're incorrigible, all of you!" Elisabeth barked with no small amount of vexation. The communication device flapped its wings in an odd display of pride, and Elisabeth combed back her bangs as a poignant thought crossed her mind.

Nobody wanted to die.

Yet in spite of that, everyone was choosing death. And they were doing it to protect those who needed protecting.

Maclaeus looked straight ahead and, in his role as the sad, lonely man bearing the weight of the world, he spoke. "Madam Elisabeth, would you do the honors? We've all chosen to tie our fates to yours, and for the sake of the people, we're prepared to dance this dance to the bitter end. Now, say the word and lead us into hell."

At that moment, Elisabeth felt as though her entire body had been buffeted by a fierce gale. However, the sensation hadn't been caused by the wind. Innumerable people were listening to her words. The strength of their gazes was striking her like an arrow. The high priests were kneeling, Vyadryavka was crossing his arms, Izabella was staring ahead with great dignity, Jeanne was grinning ever so slightly, and the human king was blinking back tears.

Countless soldiers were hanging on to her every word.

Her next few words would no doubt lead many of them to their deaths.

Even so, she had no regrets.

And so the Torture Princess made her fearless declaration.

"We go now to our deaths—to our dawn. Let Armageddon begin."



"This time, foolish child, I, too, will join the fray."

The hallway was aflutter with activity as everyone rushed to and fro in preparation for the battle.

Suddenly, Elisabeth heard someone call over to her from behind.

She turned back to find that the darkness in one corner of the hallway was deeper than it should have been. A smooth ripple spread across the shadow's surface.

Then, like a fish leaping from the water, a fell beast appeared from within.

It was the Kaiser, the supreme hound. The knights present all leaped where they stood, but the Kaiser ignored them. He gave his head a great shake.

Elisabeth narrowed her crimson eyes.

During the battle with the Sand Queen, the Kaiser had steadfastly chosen to remain on the sidelines. She couldn't imagine what was different now. "What are you up to, Kaiser? Here I was thinking you had no intention of fighting at all."

"Ha. Fool. I told you, didn't I? The stage wasn't suitable for me to come out on, and that a more fitting moment lay later on. Now that time has come. That's all there is to it. You need wings, do you not? Just this once, I shall allow you to ride me."

His final offer caught Elisabeth completely by surprise. It was an exception among exceptions for that proud beast to allow a human atop his back. Elisabeth sank into thought for a moment. The fact that "the time had come" allowed her to arrive at a conclusion, and she confronted the Kaiser about a fact that, on some level, she had realized all along. "When your contractor Vlad died, you should have disappeared. Yet here you are, just as ever. It stands to reason, then, that in Vlad's final moments, you used the person who appeared before him—the Saint—as an intermediary to make a new contract."

The Kaiser offered little in the way of a response. He just silently sneered at her.

Elisabeth stared into his hellfire-filled gaze and cut to the chase.

"Your new contractor—is it Kaito Sena?"

"The one and only. Foolish child. I say, that certainly took you long enough to figure out." As he replied, the Kaiser scratched the back of his ear in much the manner an actual dog would. For some time, the question had been, what exactly happened back there? Perhaps having grown tired of growing tired, the

Kaiser finally filled in the blanks. *“The Saint appeared the moment Vlad died, and part of what she did there was ensure the succession of my contract. To do so, she returned it to its original owner, and Kaito Sena received it. And when he did, he asked something of me: ‘When Elisabeth is in peril, I want you to save her,’ he said. What a dolt that one is. As always, the things that come out of his mouth are nonsensical beyond compare.”*

The fact that the request came from someone he deemed worthy notwithstanding, the Kaiser had probably been loath to admit that something like that was the sole reason behind his actions. Upon recognizing that further silence would cause problems down the road, though, he had given up and explained himself.

However, Elisabeth’s response was to narrow her eyes. Surely that condition had been met long ago. “I feel I’ve been in no small amount of peril up till now.”

“Ha! How so?! The rabble died off, certainly, but I see you’re still standing. But this time is different. You’ll die if things go on like this. There can be no doubt of that. So consider this something to be proud of. I shall accompany you to the depths of Hell itself. After all, failing to carry out that single request of his would be a blemish on my reputation.”

The Kaiser scoffed. Elisabeth stared intently at him.

The supreme hound didn’t seem to realize it himself, but Elisabeth couldn’t help but give voice to her observation. “You sound more human than ever.”

“In what way?! I’ll bite your head off, child,” the Kaiser growled back. Even his expression seemed oddly human.

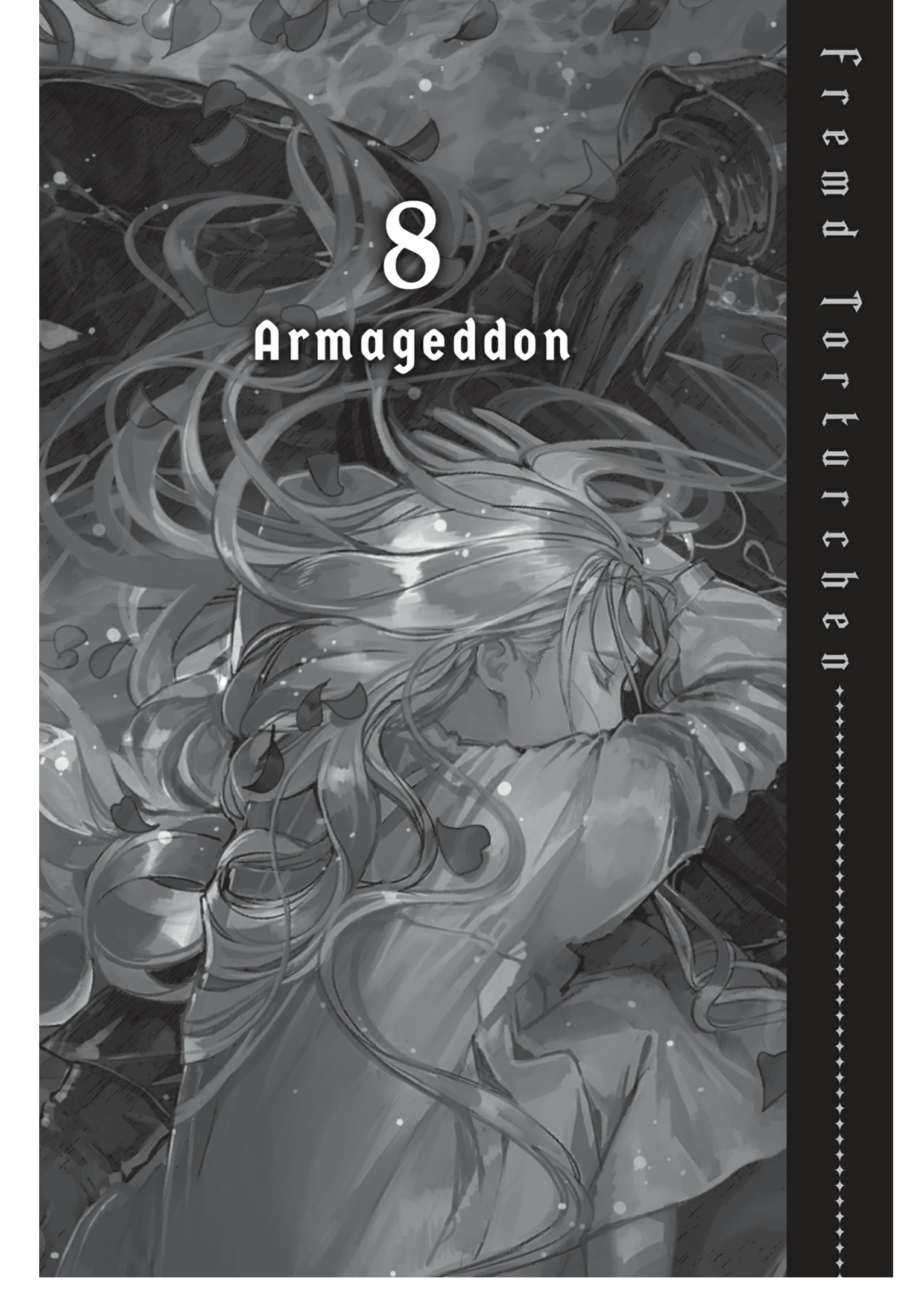
That said, Elisabeth had no idea if there was any deeper meaning to the fact.



Thus, the battle began.

So that the people of the world could struggle valiantly and die believing in the future.

So that they could bring the story to an end.



8

Armageddon

F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e n

8

Armageddon

It's time for a story.

It's the story of a boy who was brutally killed by another and a story of a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps it's a story of a child who was abandoned by his parents and a hero who was abandoned by the world.

It's a story of what happened after the two of them parted ways.

For that was when the tale of admiration, folly, and love ended, and when the tale everyone built up of repentance, hatred, and dreams began.

Or perhaps,

it was the story of a young lady left alone and a story of a child who was abandoned, a tale of a woman who was once a monster and a girl who became a monster herself.

And so too was it the story of the legions who were foolish and unchanging in their ways, yet were worthy of protection precisely because of that.

In short, it was a story of the masses.

A story of the fate of those who hated, and loathed, and loved, and feared, and sorrowed, and grieved, and yet made their choices all the same.

It was a story that would never be remembered as a tale from long, long ago.

For it was a horrible, wretched little anecdote.

One that was far too twisted to pass off as a fairy tale.

It was, in the end, a story that needed to come to an end.

And so she took up her sword. And so they drew their blades.

It's time for a story.

A story of repentance, hatred, and dreams.

A story in which she and they dreamed of saving the world.

A story they dreamed with all their might,

even if it meant throwing themselves to the wolves.



A calamity cometh.

A calamity cometh.

To all the peoples of the land.

And that calamity's form was that of a little girl.

They didn't even have to wait for evening to fall.

When the adorable little girl made her descent, the sky at her back was still a pale blue.

As promised, Alice arrived in the plaza just before the royal tomb. She did a twirl for no particular reason, and her dress's frills spun in a circle around her. The Saint's blood she had previously been drenched in was all gone.

Now she was the spitting image of an envoy from the heavens.

Despite the fact that she was calamity given flesh, Alice was wearing a great big smile. She called out, her voice light and cheery. "All right, Elisabeth! I came, just like we promised!"

Light crackled across the air, burning bright as it seared its way toward Alice.

The attack came in the form of a divine beast, and it had been summoned forcefully without even the use of a chant. However, Alice didn't so much as deploy Humpty Dumpty in her defense. She simply let out a quiet murmur, as though she'd foreseen the attack.

"White Rabbit Hole."

A black hole opened up in the air, soundlessly carrying the light and heat away to some wondrous land.

In the same breath, Alice wordlessly called forth her knight, and the White Knight made his majestic arrival with nary a sound.

Alice slung herself onto his steed's back.

The Knight swung his lance diagonally and carved his weapon through the empty air just as silently as he'd made his appearance. The shock wave from the strike traveled all the way to one of the graveyard's far-off knolls and exploded against it. After a brief moment of stillness, the entire knoll got blasted away. Fire began raging off in the distance.

Nobody there could have possibly survived.

Alice held down her hat as she watched the destruction play out. She let out a loud shout. "You're supposed to start with introductions! But now, see, the dummies who tried to help you are all dead! Why don't you come on out now, Elisabeth?!"

"Impressive as always, I see. Measuring you by this world's framework is an exercise in futility. The way you defy all limits and boundaries you should be restrained by, why, it's like dealing with God or Diablo if they were given free will."

When the dust cloud settled, there stood Elisabeth. The Torture Princess's black hair fluttered behind her as she and the Fremd Torturchen squared off. Alice smiled again, then replied in a lilting tune. "That's right. Did you only just realize it, Elisabeth? I'm the bringer of the end of days, the new crisis, the Beast of the End. Or maybe I'm the one who delivers the final judgment. It doesn't really matter. What matters is, when Father died, I finally understood something. If I wanted to, I could and can destroy anything."

Alice softly closed her eyes. Her voice rang with a deep regret.

"I wish I'd realized it back when Father was still alive. Then I could've destroyed everything except the two of us."

If she'd done that, Alice wouldn't have had to be alone. But time only marched in one direction.

Just like the White Rabbit was late, Alice had been too late as well. That was why she wanted to carry out Lewis's final wish. She intertwined her fingers as

though in prayer.

“There was someone who loved me. There was someone who stroked my hair. There was someone who forgave me. He was the first person in all the world who did that. And this is what he wanted.”

This is what I want.

So,

“Please, everyone, let’s all please die together.”

Her voice echoed out pleadingly. She looked like she was on the verge of tears, and she was making the request with utmost sincerity.

Elisabeth sighed. She thrust her finger straight at Alice.

Then the Torture Princess gave the same bold reply she once had so long ago.

“Hard pass!”

“...I beg your pardon?”

Alice gave her a look of absolute displeasure. A childish rage flared up in her red eyes.

Elisabeth ignored her and snapped her fingers.

A large hound appeared by her side. The flesh on his back churned. With a horrible noise, his ribs extended out into the sky, and membranes spread across them and formed bat-like wings. The Kaiser laughed in a voice that sounded almost human.

Elisabeth didn’t care one bit about Alice’s displeasure. She spoke, proud and unfaltering. “’Tis time for our game, Alice. I shall have difficulty besting you on my own, no doubt, but...a promise is a promise. Now come! The dawn is nigh! Come end my long nightmare, if you can!”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me twice! I’m going to end this, Elisabeth! Right here, right now!” Alice shouted back. The White Knight readied his lance.

Elisabeth leaped atop the Kaiser’s back. She soared high into the air. The Knight swung his lance to the side, and the Kaiser responded by giving his wings a powerful flap. The two shock waves slammed into each other. However, the

White Knight's blow won out.

That was when Elisabeth called out the name of an old, familiar torture device.

"Iron Maiden!"

A maiden with golden hair and a scarlet dress manifested in the air. She spread her arms out lovingly, embracing even that invisible shock wave and killing its momentum. However, doing so destroyed her, and she plummeted downward.

But she wasn't the only attack being deployed.

"Ah, aah, ah, AH, ahh, AAAAAAaaaaaaAaAaAaAAAAA!"

There was an eerie solemnity to the voices. They sounded just as much like a scream as they did a hymn.

A flock of birds. A school of fish. Rainbow light. Drops of blood.

The attack slammed into Alice hard—from the *side*.

"Huh?"

As far as Alice knew, she had already finished killing the saints.

That was what made it the perfect surprise attack.

Some of her white hair burst into flames, and she hurriedly put it out. Meanwhile, the White Knight held his shield forward. A great bow shot slammed into it, and the arrow's powerful poison began eating away at the shield's metal.

Then another barrage of great bow arrows came flying from a different direction altogether. The White Knight swatted them all down.

Although Alice was unharmed, her red eyes were as wide as dinner plates. She let out a dumbfounded murmur. "You're kidding... Just how many people do you have?"

"I told you, did I not? On my own, I would've had trouble besting you. But with allies, 'tis a whole different story. We intend to face you until death claims us—O haughty judge, O ye who would name herself the end of days' reprisal."

The Kaiser fluttered his wings, and Elisabeth came to a stop in the air. However, the situation hadn't changed. Things were still just as critical as they were before, and the tables remained utterly unturned. Yet Elisabeth made a bold proclamation.

“Welcome, Fremd Torturchen. Welcome to Wonderland.”

The Torture Princess bore a vicious grin.

She was majestic in her brazenness,
almost as though she truly believed
that victory was all that awaited her.



Lance strikes carved through the air.

The thrusts were aimed at the saints, who were in the middle of dispersing. However, not all the attacks proved fatal.

Part of that was thanks to the priests' barriers, but more than anything, it was due to the paladins, who were working together to move the saints around. And the method they were using was as simple as could be.

They had loaded the saints and priests onto carts and were pulling them through the areas of the city that had already been evacuated. It made for an absurd spectacle, and “irreverent” didn't even begin to describe it. Surely there had to be a limit to how ridiculous a tactic could be. At the same time, though, it was proving surprisingly effective.

The saints' second biggest problem might have been their lack of endurance, but their biggest flaw was how immobile they were.

A stationary target was just asking to be killed. Once it got moving, though, it was a different story.

As the paladins raced atop the cobble paving, one of the youngsters among their ranks called over.

“La Dhruv, are you holding up all right?”

“I... Yes, I'm...still...fine,” replied the old man with the belly full of fish. He

rubbed his transparent stomach and nodded.

He had used up all his mana during the fight against the Sand Queen, but he had largely recovered. The mana from the high priests and the blood transfusions had done the trick. Now he was good to fire off multiple shots in succession again.

The old man, La Dhruv, had fought under the Mad King's command during Ragnarok as well.

The bombardments the saints fired off in that battle were the stuff of legend, even to that day. Now La Dhruv was willingly staring death in the eye yet again.

The young paladin stole a glance back at the man he was risking his life to cart around. He went on, almost unthinkingly. "Forgive me, but I have to ask...why?"

"Just shut up and run, you dolt! You'll bite your tongue!" the man's superior snapped at him.

"No, it's, fine," La Dhruv said, cutting in. He gently answered the question with one of his own. "Why, what?"

The young paladin faltered for a moment. However, not wanting to have any regrets, he let his doubts spill out. "I, um, I heard about what happened with Madam Elisabeth and La Filsell. And about how you spent all that time with La Filsell afterward... That's why I was so surprised when you all volunteered to put your lives on the line and carry out this miraculous bombardment. I just wanted to ask, why?" he asked timidly.

The fact of the matter was, this was a battlefield. It wasn't the kind of place you went to fight on behalf of someone you hated. La Dhruv gave the young man's question an understanding nod. Then, abruptly, his face underwent a shift. All of a sudden, La Dhruv was youthful again. All his wrinkles and age spots were gone. Young and beautiful, he spoke. "We listen to all voices. Not just La Filsell's lament, but also La Christoph's prayer...as well as the Saint's final words."

"You heard Her Holiness?!"

"Let me tell you something rather blasphemous. We may be saints, but just like her...it was as *people* that we made our choices. And our choice, made

freely, was to believe.”

The paladin’s eyes went wide at the unexpected revelation. Normally, the saints had little in the way of free will. However, the Saint’s death seemed to have triggered something in them. Now they had found something to believe in.

While the paladin gawked, La Dhruv’s face returned to decrepitude. His hundreds of wrinkles creased as he spoke softly. “Even, if, we someday, lose, our connections...God, will still, be in, our hearts. As people, we believe, in La Christoph’s smile, and the Saint’s wish. And those, who owe their life to another, have a duty to fight.”

The young paladin gasped. It was true—if not for the deaths of La Christoph and the Saint, the world would have reached its breaking point far earlier. Everyone there owed their lives to those two.

The sure light of volition burned in La Dhruv’s eyes. Despite his unsteady voice, his intent was clear. “And so, we fight. No matter how foolish it may be.”

With that, La Dhruv resumed his chant, and the fish-shaped divine beasts bursting from his belly twisted and writhed as they shot forth. They swam through the air and made for Alice. It was hardly enough to take her down, but the incessant bombardment was making it difficult for her to get a precise read on their locations. However, the shock waves kept on coming.

The paladins ran with all their might, then abruptly veered and changed course.

A moment later, the house right behind them exploded. As rubble rained down around them, a couple of the paladins shouted.

“Sorry about the bumpy ride.”

“You know, this is almost fun!”

“Is that so,” La Dhruv replied. “Just, don’t, mess up, the steering.”

“Of course!”

All they could do was run around awkwardly until the saints hit their limits. Either that or until they got unlucky and died to one of the shock waves. However, their gaits were free of despair, and their expressions were

unclouded. For there was something they knew in their hearts.

There could be no doubt that they were living in the last stages of a miracle.

And knowing that meant that nothing could give them pause.



Then there were the roofs.

The people who lived in the Capital were well-off, so the houses there were built sturdy. You could run across their rooftops with no problems. And what's more, aside from the areas where nobles lived, each block of houses was built adjointly.

Because of that, the beastfolk and Royal Knights were able to move freely about the rooftops.

Their great bows needed to be fixed in place, so they had abandoned them as soon as the battle began in earnest. Now they were using regular bows to fire off their sporadic rains of poison arrows. Whenever they got close to the main plaza, they also mixed in attacks with jars of oil and flaming arrows.

The haphazard volleys amounted to little more than harassment.

They were unable to inflict any actual damage to Alice herself. However, their efforts made for a fine distraction. Each time her dress melted or burst into flames, Alice would get flustered and throw a childish tantrum. And because there were so many different people firing, the White Knight had trouble aiming.

Even so, the archers still needed to dodge the wide-area attacks with their own two feet.

"Southeast, range four! Disperse!"

When the beastfolk voice cut through the air, everyone scattered. The shouts were designed to succinctly convey the direction and power of the incoming attacks. The archers broke into a dash. When the shock wave landed, it carved a gaping hole in the ground.

Debris exploded up from the impact site and rained down hard before eventually settling down.

Vyadryavka rose from his defensive crouch. Darius stood beside him, lightly armored and stretching his shoulders. He'd forced his way through more than one rain of rubble, but there wasn't so much as a scratch on him. The man was built tough.

Vyadryavka gave him an appraising look, then spoke with some surprise in his voice. "My people do battle in the forest, so we're old hands at fighting across varying elevations. I must say, you and your men impress me. To be honest, I didn't expect you all to be able to keep up with our speed."

"We're the Royal Knights, I'll have you know! We know this city's layout, even its rooftops, like the back of our hands! I was expecting you lot to spend half your time getting lost, but I gotta hand it to you, your men did well!"

Vyadryavka finishing standing up. Darius crossed his arms.

They stared confrontationally at each other. A few seconds passed. Then the two military men bumped their arms together.

Each had praised the other, and each of them nodded. Then they lowered their arms and resumed their positions.

Vyadryavka readied his bow once more. The beastfolk around him followed suit.

At the moment, they were far away from the plaza. Vyadryavka used every ounce of beastfolk strength and visual acuity he had, drew back his bowstring, and fired.



"Hellhole, Pendulum, Gavel!"

All the while, Elisabeth was deploying one torture device after another.

She knew full well that all of them would just be destroyed, yet she doled them out lavishly and spared no expense.

The sheer fervor she was displaying was almost reminiscent of her onetime fight against Kaito Sena.

The White Knight handled all her attacks with aplomb. He charged through the Hellhole, gouging out the earth all around him, then sliced the Pendulum to

ribbons and batted away the Gavel with his sword's pommel. But every second he had to spend defending himself was time that he wasn't attacking the others.

Then the saints' blasts and the myriad arrows found their mark.

Izabella took advantage of that opening to glide forward on her mechanical legs. She wound a chain around the White Knight's arm and slid in a wide circle to obstruct her foe's movements. Her silver hair traced an elegant arc through the air.

Even so, the White Knight continued maneuvering his steed and evading Elisabeth's torture devices.

That was when the saints' bombardment hit Alice head-on. She screamed.

Before the White Knight had a chance to grab her, Izabella severed the chain of her own accord. She beat an immediate retreat, then spun back around and hurled a good dozen throwing knives at Alice.

As she did, Elisabeth's voice rose up in unison. Six vortices of petals and darkness manifested in the midst of Izabella's attack.

"La Guillotine, Saint of Beheadings."

The situation was pure chaos.

With all the attacks coming in, they could barely even see Alice anymore.

It almost felt like they were a group of adults ganging up on a child and bullying her. There was a limit to how long they could keep up their onslaught, but at the same time, they were slowly but surely wearing Alice down as well. They had reached an equilibrium.

Now all we need do is buy as much time as we can.

Elisabeth could see victory just on the horizon. She called forth yet another torture device.

Alice held down her hat with tears in her eyes. She balled herself up smaller and smaller, then murmured just five words,

"This is all so dumb."

Her voice reached Elisabeth's ears with unsettling clarity.

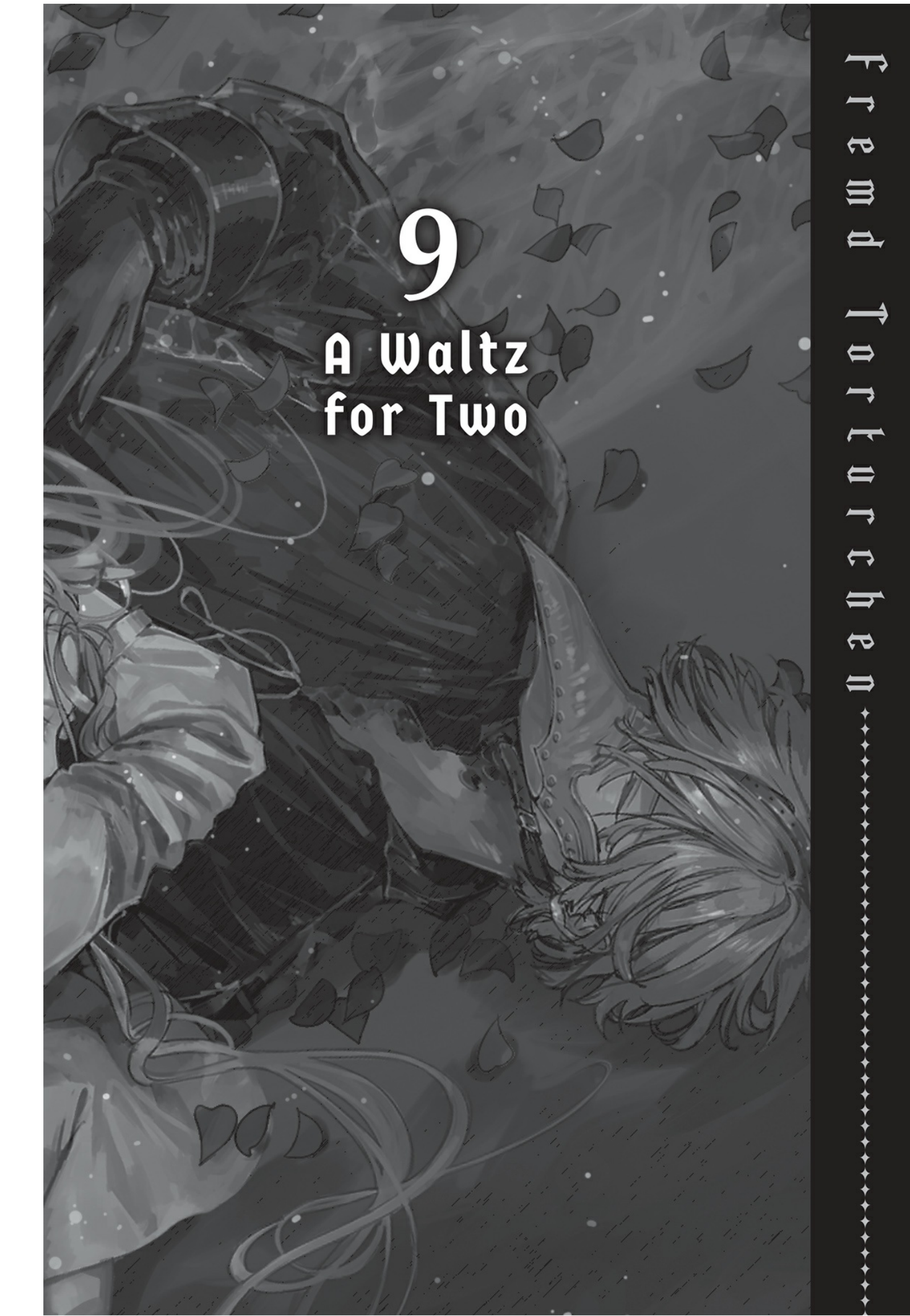
At the same time, the White Knight drew his arm all the way back.

He was completely ignoring all the incoming attacks. This time, something was terribly different. A chill ran down Elisabeth's spine. However, Izabella and Jeanne were the only other ones who noticed. There wasn't time to shout out an order.

Not a moment later, the White Knight *threw his lance*.

Silver light hurtled through the air.

It drew a straight line not just to the plaza, but all the way to the Capital proper, and obliterated everyone in its vicinity.



9

A Waltz
for Two

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

A Waltz for Two

In truth, she knew it was never going to happen.

But still, she wanted to dream.

The place where Jeanne de Rais once lived had been home to nothing but death. It was a remote place surrounded by cliffs, and everyone there lived knowing that death would someday take them. To them, Jeanne was nothing but a puppet meant to massacre them all. In order to create their fervent entreaty, the alchemists put their very lives on the line.

“Grant us our wish, O Torture Princess. Send us to our eternal rest.”

Jeanne had no desire to speak ill of their pride, nor did she intend to ridicule the cause they’d spent so long believing in.

Otherwise, she wouldn’t have put in the work she had to see their dream to fruition and to become the maiden of salvation.

As far as how she actually felt went, though, she had just one thing to say.

“That’s so messed up!

“I mean, if you’re dying, your dreams ain’t worth shit. They’re just a burden, weighing down the livin’.”

The alchemists hadn’t let emotions influence their actions.

To them, there was only death. And that coldness of theirs had been Jeanne’s entire world.

But then she found something warm.

Izabella was the first beautiful person she had ever met, and even after all the machine parts Jeanne had augmented her with, Izabella had retained her kindness. She was so gallant, so lovely, and always so warm.

Izabella took her hand.

Izabella didn't shy away from her blood.

Izabella cried for her sake.

Izabella lamented her wounds.

And so, Jeanne let herself believe.

She'd even had a foolishly sappy exchange about it.

"Marriage!"

"Of course! We'll have a big ceremony in the Capital!"

She'd wanted so badly to believe.

Like a maiden in the midst of a dream.

"In truth, I knew it was never going to happen. **But still, I wanted to dream of something beautiful.**"



There was no time to dodge the White Knight's throw.

In all likelihood, just about everyone was dead.

Vyadryavka? Darius? The paladins? The Royal Knights? The saints? The beastfolk?

Rubble fell.

Fire rained down.

They eclipsed everything.

All of them?

Elisabeth's crimson eyes went wide. She found herself at a loss for words.

Before her, she could see the solid line that had been gouged out of the city. Fire licked at the gash. It was like looking at a meteor's landing site. The civilians had been evacuated already, but all the combatants were dead. There was little chance any of them had survived.

Alice quietly raised her head. She posed her question with the indifference of

a queen. “Now it’s truly over. Really and truly. Later, I’ll make sure to go kill the king who conspired with all those knights and saints, too. So are we done playing tag now?”

She calmly cocked her head to the side. The look in her eyes made her intent perfectly clear. If the game was over, she was going to begin her massacre. She wasn’t even giving Elisabeth time to mourn the dead. Alice was a queen now, and her heart had no mercy in it.

Elisabeth shook off her shock for the moment.

She was just about to give her unhesitating answer, but then another voice cut in.

“Not yet. We’re still here, aren’t we? **Open your damn eyes, girl.**”

“We, married couple Izabella Vicker and Jeanne de Rais, will be your opponents.”

The woman of gold and the woman of silver strode forward. The former’s right hand and the latter’s left hand were clasped tightly together with their fingers interwoven.

Elisabeth bit her lip. The two of them were strong, to be sure. But they were no match for the Fremd Torturchen. And the gap between their strength and hers should have been obvious to them.

Yet even so, they didn’t let go of each other’s hands, and they didn’t flee.

The sheer depth of their resolve was plain for Elisabeth to see. However, she raised her voice anyway. “Jeanne, Izabella—this is beyond you. You’ve done enough!”

“You said it yourself once. ‘If any dared tell me what to do, I’d lend them no ear.’ ‘The burden of your choice shall be yours alone to shoulder.’ And ‘Saving the world and destroying it are but mere matters of personal selfishness,’” Jeanne replied.

Those were words that Elisabeth had spoken long ago at the World’s End.

Elisabeth let out a small gasp. Sure enough, choosing to live or die was a burden that only a person themselves could shoulder. No matter what lay

beyond, nobody had the right to stop them from making that decision. However, Elisabeth started to argue anyway. Before she could, however, Jeanne went on with a serene look in her eyes. “Do you have any regrets, foolish lady?”

“What nonsense are you spouting, now? At this eleventh hour, how—?”

“Could I possibly still have regrets,” she tried to finish. This was supposed to be a battle she was going to her death in. The very fact she was there should have refuted the very notion. But she couldn’t do it.

For in that moment,

“Ah—”

Elisabeth remembered.

It all hit her, whether she wanted it to or not.

That one wish she had, the wish not unlike a star.

Jeanne snorted upon seeing Elisabeth’s reaction. She spoke in a tone both severe and matter-of-fact. “You want to stop us. And when you succeed, you’ll end up dying in our place, but—***‘you can’t seriously tell me you paid a single thought as to whether you’d regret it or not!’***”

This time, the words were ones that Kaito Sena had once spoken.

Jeanne had been torn about whether or not to kill Izabella back at the World’s End, and that was what Kaito had told Jeanne to help her see that she wanted to save Izabella. Now Jeanne had taken that same comment and turned it back on Elisabeth.

There was no way Elisabeth could lie, not when faced with those words.

She was totally and completely beaten.

Recognizing that, she steered the Kaiser in a new direction. If those two were going to stay, then it was Elisabeth’s job to leave. Having all of them get taken out in one fell swoop would be counterproductive to their goal of buying time.

Elisabeth quietly proceeded onward. Her black hair fluttered behind her. However, she did make one half whisper of a comment. “Forgive me. I shall

follow you shortly hereafter.”

“If all goes well, you won’t have to. **I ain’t plannin’ on goin’ down easy, y’know.**”

“That’s right, Jeanne,” Izabella agreed. “I...wait, ‘I’? Don’t you mean ‘we’ won’t—hey, whoa, aaaaaah!”

Instead of answering the question, Jeanne snapped her fingers.

When she did, all of Izabella’s machine parts burst into motion.

In accordance with Jeanne’s orders, they started moving on their own, and Izabella’s legs broke into a run regardless of what Izabella herself desired. She raced down the path that had been carved through the city. In what seemed like no time at all, she was already gone from sight.

After checking to make sure that Izabella had fled far enough away, Jeanne nodded all on her own. “You hoped for a future together with me. You brought me happiness...and that alone is enough. **Good-bye, my beloved. May you find a more suitable partner, and may you live happily ever after with them.**”

Jeanne gave her a little wave, much the way a child would. However, she immediately squeezed her pale hand tight. She turned toward Alice and focused her rose-colored eyes straight on her.

Then, for the very first time in her life,

Jeanne broke into a gentle smile.

She faced the Fremd Torturchen and spoke.

“Would you mind if we talked for a bit, young lady?”

“Talked?”

It was such a fair and radiant expression

that Alice couldn’t help but stop mid-attack.



For a moment, Alice was taken aback. She seemed captivated by Jeanne’s expression. However, she hurriedly pulled herself back together. She spoke in a tizzy. “A-ahh. You’re trying to buy time, aren’t you? But I’m not going to fall for

that. Crushing you will be ever so easy. You should know that no one is coming to save you.”

“You’re not wrong. It would be a lie to say that I’m uninterested in buying time. But more than that...**I’ve wanted to chat with you for a good long while now.**”

Jeanne’s expression was as serious as could be, and her words were unblemished by falsehoods.

Alice squinted at her. She still found the whole thing rather suspicious, but she bade her White Knight to lower his lance for the time being.

Jeanne gave her a small nod by way of thanks, then went on with great eloquence. “I’m an artificially made Torture Princess. The moment I was born, I was entrusted with a mission to save the world. ‘Grant us our wish, O Torture Princess. Send us to our eternal rest.’ I won’t speak ill of their request, and I intend to honor their pride. But still...what they gave me was unmistakably a curse.”



The slightest of gleams shone in Jeanne's rose eyes. Alice arched a suspicious eyebrow at her. Given her expression, she didn't understand what Jeanne was getting at, but she definitely had a bad feeling about it.

Alice gulped down her saliva. Her voice trembled a little as she urged Jeanne to go on. "...What are you saying?"

"I'm talking about repentance, hatred, and dreams. He probably apologized to you as he entrusted you with his dream. But really, that dream was nothing more than a bald-faced hatred toward the world. **I mean, you cottoned on to that, right?**"

A flash of terror ran across Alice's face. The tremendous power she wielded was the furthest thing from her mind, and she tried to clamp her hands over her ears. Before she could, though, Jeanne went on and whispered the thing that nobody else had pointed out.

Her words gouged at that still-fresh wound.

"He loved you, no doubt—**but there wasn't any love in that dyin' wish of his.**"

"Off With Her Head!"

Alice cast her spell, and an executioner's ax appeared in midair. However, all it managed to lop off were a few tufts of Jeanne's hair. Alice was so shaken it had affected her aim. She was quivering all over.

Jeanne's eyes flashed like jewels as she blinked them. She quietly went on. "That isn't what love is."

"Shut up, just, just shut up already!"

"Izabella, my beloved, held my hand. She didn't shy away from my blood. She cried for me. She lamented my wounds. And if she was to die, then no matter how it happened, she would say one thing and one thing alone to me."

Jeanne looked down at her finger—and at the gleaming blue ring resting on it. With how dire the situation was, they hadn't been able to get the real deal, and that was what she'd been given in the meantime. Jeanne planted a kiss on it and continued.

“Go on and find happiness without me.”

“Stop it! Stop...stop...please, just stop...”

“You had a curse placed on you. **The dreams of the dying ain’t worth shit. They’re just burdens, weighing down the livin’.** So why not just put a stop to all this? **I mean, you go and smash up the whole world, and what’ll you really be left with?**”

Alice hunched over and began violently trembling. She looked around nervously. However, there was nobody to answer for her. For Alice was alone. She cried and cried and bit down hard on her lip.

Then she shook her head and spat out her reply like one would a mouthful of blood. “I know that. I knew it already, I really did. But in their heart of hearts, everyone has just one thing that truly matters to them. If they can’t have that, then what *can* they have? I’m the only one who understands Father’s sorrow. So it’s fine. I’m not going to stop. This is my choice, and I’ve made it.”

Alice violently wiped away her tears. She glared forward with all her might.

Then, like a proper adult woman, she spoke plainly and definitively.

“I choose to accept Father as he was.”

Alice had decided to fulfill his wish. No longer would she hesitate, and no longer would she falter.

In that moment, Alice accepted it all. She chose to affirm her father’s hatred, then made her final decision. And by doing so, she was spelling the world’s doom. It was a tragic path to choose, but the love that had inspired it was admirable.

Someone she wished was alive had been killed. He had entrusted her with his dream. And she had accepted it, even knowing it was a curse.

And thus, she hoisted up the flag of revenge—and chose to die alongside all of creation.

Alice raised her hand to resume her attack. However, she spoke in an unthinkable gentle voice.

“But still, thank you. I’ll remember what you told me until the very end.”

“I see. Well, if you’re going to accept everything about your beloved, **then I guess we ain’t got no choice but to kill each other.**”

“That’s right. And I’m sorry to say that it’s me who’ll be killing you.”

There was a tinge of loneliness in Alice’s voice, but as she spoke, she continued making her move. She snapped her fingers.

The White Knight did as instructed and brandished his lance.

As a show of resistance, Jeanne summoned up eddies of golden flower petals and forged them into the most powerful shield she could muster. The White Knight fired his shock wave. Even at a glance, Jeanne could tell that she didn’t have the strength to block it. But all of a sudden, something changed.

The White Knight’s shot went wide. Instead of hitting Jeanne, it went flying off into the distance. Jeanne squinted to try and figure out what had happened. When she realized the reason, she gasped.

At some point, someone had wound a chain around the White Knight’s arm.

Jeanne traced its silver length with her gaze. There on the other end, standing there like it was the most natural place in the world for her to be

was Jeanne’s beloved,

Izabella.



Jeanne thought she was dreaming. But no. It was real.

She had appeared like a prince out of a fairy tale, ready to show up when and wherever she was needed.

That was simply how fantastical the woman Jeanne loved was.

“What are you doing back here?! **I thought I got your ass to safety!**”

However, Jeanne shouted all the same. Izabella blinked. The situation before them was downright hopeless, yet for some reason, Izabella scratched her cheek sheepishly like she didn’t have a care in the world. She replied in an awkward, almost bashful tone. “Maybe, but...isn’t it a husband’s job to come running when her wife is in trouble?”

“What’re you on about, dumbass?! I’m not the wife; *you’re* the wife!” Jeanne cried at the top of her lungs.

She wondered what in the world was going on. Both of them were being idiots, but as Jeanne saw it, Izabella’s actions were far more idiotic than hers. She should have known perfectly well that coming back would mean her death. But at the same time, there was something else Jeanne came to realize.

No matter how many times she tried to push Izabella away, Izabella would just keep coming back. Why, she wouldn’t so much as give it a second thought. Her fair silver hair would stream behind her all the while, and the look in her blue and purple eyes would be one of bewilderment at the very prospect of staying away. But that all made perfect sense.

That was just the kind of woman Izabella Vicker was.

And that was precisely why Jeanne loved her so.

Tears welled up in Jeanne’s eyes, and she clamped them shut. Then she gave up. And as she did, she nervously extended her hand. Earlier, even though she knew how impossible it was given the circumstances, she had dreamed of something beautiful.

“Marriage!”

“Of course! We’ll have a big ceremony in the Capital!”

Now it was as though that dream were coming true,

like they were having their wedding right then and there.

Jeanne took her lover by the hand, and Izabella readily squeezed hers back. Golden flower petals decorated their surroundings like they would in a ceremonial hall. As she intertwined their fingers tight, Jeanne posed the question.

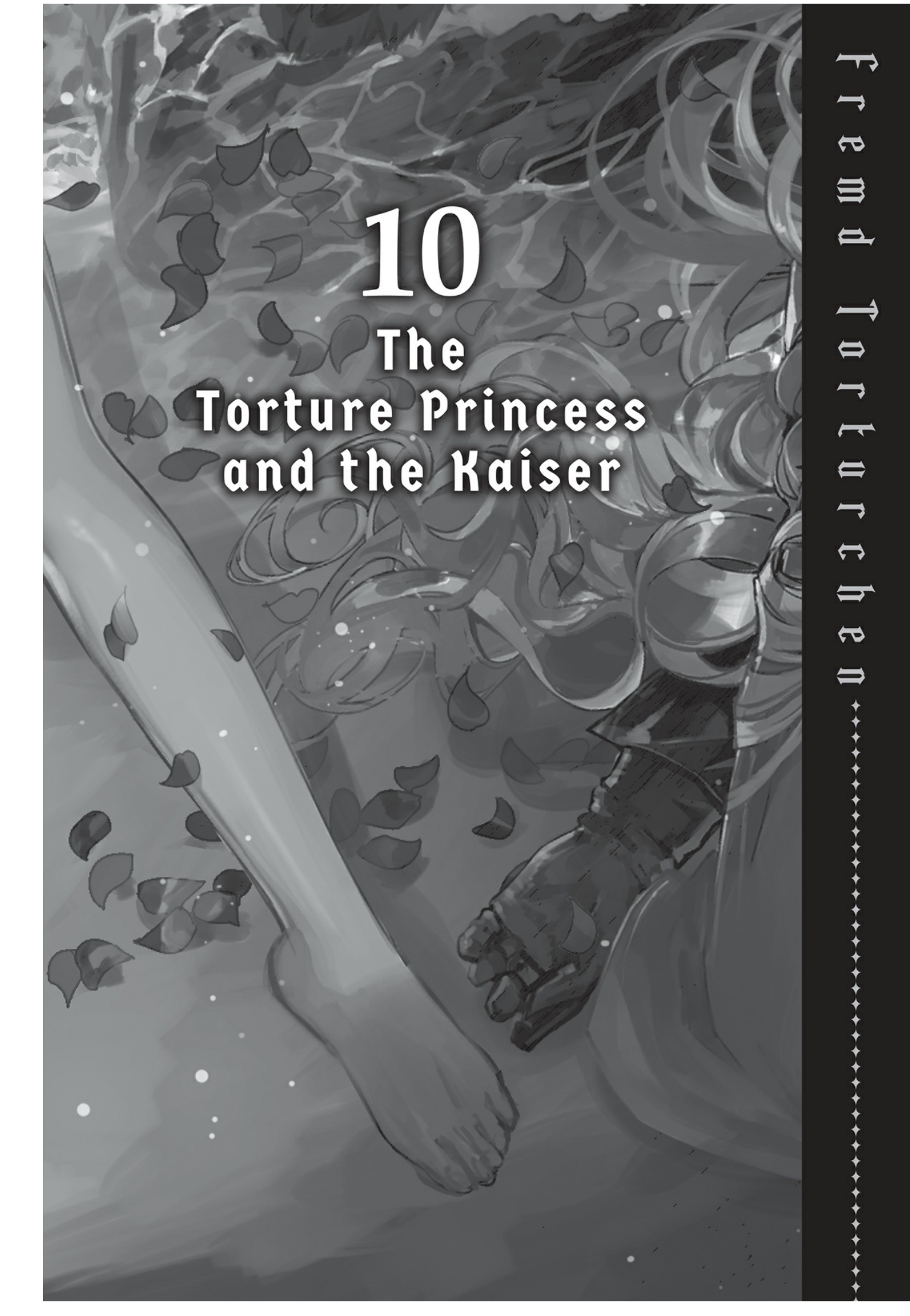
“My beloved lady, will you stay by my side, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, to love and to cherish—even if it means throwing your life away?”

“It would be my pleasure,” Izabella replied, beaming. She puffed herself up with pride, like there was no other answer worth giving. Jeanne gave a teary-

eyed smile.

And with that, the two of them
began their Waltz.





10

The Torture Princess and the Kaiser

F r e a m d T o r t u r e h e n

10

The Torture Princess and the Kaiser

There was a conversation that took place just before Armageddon.

“I need to tell you about your brother.”

Those were the words Elisabeth Le Fanu had used to broach the subject with Izabella Vicker.

Then she told Izabella everything. About the contractor to the Knight, who was one of the fourteen demons—and about his features and the way he died. She told Izabella that she wasn't positive the man had actually been her younger brother, but to Izabella, the matter was settled. There was no doubt in her mind that had been her brother indeed.

Izabella's brother had had eyes of the purest blue. He was possessed with both a strong will to live and a powerful sense of justice. The regrets he felt at the Plain of Skewers would easily have been enough for the demons to win him over.

After telling Izabella what happened, Elisabeth asked her to choose if she was going to fight or not. If she wanted to flee, Elisabeth wouldn't have blamed her, and if she wanted to turn on Elisabeth, that was her right. However, Izabella's sole response had been, “Thank you.”

She wanted to thank Elisabeth for saving her brother after he fell in with the demons.

That was how she truly felt. However, that wasn't to say she didn't feel torn up about it. When she thought back, Izabella realized that, for the longest time, that was how her whole life had gone. She had constantly been forced to weigh her own wants and needs against what was right, and she had chosen righteousness every time.

She had no regrets about that. But it did make her sad. Izabella Vicker's life

had been a painfully prosaic one. But then salvation had come to her from the last place she'd expected.

The person who'd once fallen into her arms had been unbelievably beautiful.

Jeanne had saved her.

Jeanne had pined for her.

Jeanne had loved her.

Jeanne was her everything.

Jeanne had gone and loved someone who had naught to her name but righteousness.

And to the very end, Izabella had had the person she loved by her side.

That in and of itself was a blessing of the truest sort.

And because of that, Izabella Vicker thought of herself

as one of the happiest people in the world.

Do you pledge to take me, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, to love and to cherish, to comfort and to support, with all of your heart until death do us part?

"I do."



The corpses of two women lay before Alice.

Everything from their waists down had been shredded to ribbons, and their guts had come spilling out of their chests. However, the fact that anything remained of them at all was an oddity. Such was the sheer power of the White Knight's attack.

However, Alice had deliberately misaimed her final slash.

She couldn't blast them away into nothing.

She simply couldn't.

The two women had been holding hands to the bitter end.

And they'd been smiling oh-so-peacefully.

"Why...are you smiling?" Alice mumbled.

She racked her brain. Wasn't death supposed to be sad? Wasn't it supposed to be despair-inducing? If she were the one dying, she certainly wouldn't have been able to wear an expression like that. So why—?

"Why, why, why ARE YOU SMILINGGGGGGGGGGG?!"

She got no reply to her scream of a question. For Alice was alone. She clenched her fists tight in front of her chest. She had butchered countless scores of people there, yet she stood there and shed big, soppy tears.

Then, out of the blue, she raised her head and spoke as though she'd stumbled upon a single last ray of hope.

"Elisabeth! That's right, that's right. *Elisabeth.*"

She started walking with an unsteady gait. She had dispelled the White Knight for a time as she stared at Jeanne's and Izabella's corpses, so it was her own two legs she now tottered on. Her faltering footsteps carried her across the gash she herself had gouged in the ground.

She was the spitting image of a child who'd gotten lost.

It was like she was chasing after an older sister who had gone and left her behind.

"C'mon, Elisabeth, tell me, tell me... Because I don't get it, see."

I don't understand any of it anymore.



There wasn't a cloud in the sky. As a matter of fact, there was nothing there at all.

The only things filling it were milky-white and rainbow hues. Diablo had left no lasting changes there, yet all the same, it was impossible to deny that death had a stronger hold over the world than ever. There was something terribly odd about that fact when Elisabeth thought about it.

She was at the World's End. The place that the Saint had designated as such.

That was where she watched Jeanne and Izabella die.

She silently dispelled the image—the window—that the blue ring had displayed for her.

A single teardrop rolled down her cheek, and she turned. This time, her gaze came to a quiet rest on the people slumbering in the crystal. The Kaiser said nothing. Elisabeth gingerly placed her hand atop the crystal's glowing surface.

It was as cold as could be, but she rested her cheek against it all the same.

“Kaito, Hina...will you fight with me?”

No response came. However, she nodded anyway. She conjured a flower petal and used it to slit her wrist.

The Torture Princess's mana-infused blood spilled forth, trickling into crimson lines and delicately encircling the crystal where Kaito and Hina slept. When it did, the two slumbering pillars began moving in kind. They coiled around each other and their thorny vines pointed outward. Brilliant roses of azure and crimson bloomed along their lengths once more. Then the newly grown pillars wound themselves around the crystal like some sort of profane shrine.

Now the preparations were complete. Elisabeth let out a brief exhale. Then, without a word, she sat down.

Never again would she be able to rest her back against that crystal.

She cast her solitary gaze up at the sky.

The Kaiser made no snide remarks. He was a clever enough beast to realize that this was hardly the time for such things.

And with that, Elisabeth did like she had so long ago,
and began singing a song.



It's time for a story.

It's the story of a young woman left alone and a story of a child who was abandoned.

Or perhaps it's the story of a woman who was a monster, and a girl who

became a monster herself.

It was, in the end, a story that needed to be ended.

And so she took up her sword. And so they drew their blades.

It's time for a story.

A story of repentance, dreams, and hatred.

A story in which she and they dreamed of saving the world.

A story they dreamed with all their might,
even if it meant throwing themselves to the wolves.



The change came about all at once.

Crimson boiled up atop the clear ground, and the snowflakes piled high, and the ice cracked and shattered in succession.

A wave of terrible teleportation circles spread out like a toxin.

The first ones to show up were the fixed batteries, who appeared in a circle surrounding Elisabeth. Their eyes and tongues had been plucked out, their limbs had been severed, and they writhed as they suffered in an eternity of pain.

Elisabeth realized something in her gut.

This is the sum total of Lewis's legacy.

There was no way there were any more of them than that. Finally, the very last of their reserves had been deployed.

It was time to put an end to those pitiful creatures.

Elisabeth wasted no time in leaping astride the Kaiser. She soared through the air, nimbly avoiding the searing rays of the batteries' screams. The Kaiser flapped his wings, higher and higher and higher still. He let out a low growl.

"Enough with the nobodies. Go to your rests and be quick about it."

Upon reaching the highest of heights, the Kaiser descended.

Darkness blotted out everything around the site where the fourteen demons' mightiest member landed.

For a time, everything was deathly silent.

Then, after a few seconds, the darkness transformed into black feathers. The feathers exploded in a shower of azure flower petals. The blast was at the fixed batteries' center, and it reduced them all into piles of entrails and puddles of blood. In death, they were finally free from their suffering.

Despite the display of overwhelming power he'd just put on, though, the Kaiser didn't laugh this time.

After he landed, he adopted a low stance and growled out an ominous prophecy. *"She's coming, foolish child. A calamity cometh."*

A calamity cometh.

A calamity cometh.

Thus spoke the mightiest of the fourteen demons.

Suddenly, a black spot not unlike a rabbit hole opened in the air. A young girl in a blue dress hopped out.

It was Alice, but there was something off about her. She was crying, and both of her arms were outstretched.

She looked anxious, almost like a lost child.

"Elisabeth... Ewivubeeeth!"

"And why exactly are you crying?" Elisabeth asked her, acknowledging Alice's sorrow in a voice so gentle she surprised even herself.

Alice trembled as she shook her head. Her hat's white ribbons were drooping as well, and they shook side to side in concert with her. Tears streamed down her face as she desperately tried to get the words out. "I don't get it. I don't get anything anymore. There's only one thing I'm even still sure of. So please, Elisabeth—please, die together with me!"

"And what, may I ask, led you to that particular conclusion?"

Elisabeth's voice rang with exasperation, but she already knew.

There was no getting through to her. Alice looked like she might listen to reason, but that would never happen.

The fact of the matter was, that one thing really was all that Alice had. She had left too many corpses in her wake. Not even her youth could excuse what she'd done. And Alice herself knew she was past redemption.

Destroying everything was the only option she had.

That was simply the nature of the deeds Alice had wrought.

Before Elisabeth even noticed, Alice was astride her White Knight's horse. There had been no perceptible change in the interim. It was like an optical illusion—the scene Elisabeth had been looking at had been swapped out for another.

A realization crossed Elisabeth's mind. Alice and the White Knight were basically one and the same. She hadn't even needed to speak an incantation to summon him. The only way to beat the Knight would be to kill Alice.

The White Knight raised his lance aloft. If his strike landed, there would be no surviving it.

However, the Kaiser chose not to put any distance between them. Instead, he leaped, using his lithe muscles to propel his black body in a beautiful arc through the air. He bit down on the White Knight's neck.

As Elisabeth clung to the Kaiser's back, she reached out her arm.

Then, in unison, they wrenched Alice and the White Knight from the back of their steed.

From there, Elisabeth and the Kaiser dropped their foes from high up.

It was a tactic that was only available to them then, in that moment. Alice's tears had caused her to let down her guard in a fatal way.

"Huh?" Alice cried in surprise. However, the White Knight remained silent. He had no proper will of his own. Blood spurted out from his windpipe, but he still prioritized Alice above all else.

Still far from steady on his feet, he swung his lance. Elisabeth summoned a new weapon into her hand.

“Whip Sword!”

Her blade extended on its own accord as it curved through the air. By snapping it every which way, Elisabeth succeeded in diffusing the imperfect shock wave. Even so, it was still strong enough to sear her skin. However, she cast her Whip Sword aside all the same. She spared no thought for whatever follow-up attack might be coming. Instead, she readied Executioner’s Sword of Frankenthal and swung it straight down.

Her aim was to gouge out Alice’s heart.

“’Tis over now.”

And in that moment,

it was like time itself stood still.



Her sword cracked.

She hadn’t gouged out Alice’s heart at all. As a matter of fact, her blade had failed to so much as pierce her skin. Fissures ran along its length as it sat motionless atop Alice’s skin. It was as though she’d just tried to stab a hunk of metal.

A profound sense of remorse spread through Elisabeth’s heart as she quietly realized the truth.

Ah. Is that...so.

She was too late.

That single attack the White Knight made back at the Capital had probably marked the final borderline.

The vast quantities of mana Alice obtained had sparked a change in her body. Now no steel nor heat could mar her flesh. There wasn’t a single person in the world who could hurt Alice anymore.

All the King’s horses and all the King’s men
couldn’t kill Alice Carroll again.

Ending her is beyond me now.

Alice seemed to be aware of the change she'd undergone. For a moment, a look of sadness flitted across her face. However, her expression soon changed. She decided to adorn herself in that same innocent obliviousness to the very end.

It was as if to say that, as one who sought to end the world, doing so was her duty.

A stiff smile spread across Alice's face. She gave her fingers a light snap.

"Good-bye, Elisabeth. This was fun. Really, it was."

That was the White Knight's signal. He started by shoving the Kaiser aside, and the black beast left a trail of crushed snowflakes in his wake as he skidded across the ice. Then the White Knight rose to his feet. There was a deep sadness in Alice's voice. However, the White Knight showed no mercy. He raised his spear and drew it all the way back.

Then he hurled it straight at Elisabeth.

The deadly blow was accompanied by a burning shock wave, and when the Kaiser dived in the way, it pierced him right through.



"...Why?" Elisabeth asked, shouting the question at the speared hound from the bottom of her heart.

"A fair...question. I'm not...quite sure myself," the Kaiser replied. He sounded oddly pleased.

Cracks formed on his sleek black belly and began spreading outward. This was no ordinary wound he'd suffered. He was starting to shatter, like ceramic that had been exposed to too much heat. One *clink* rang out after another as little shards of him broke off. With a distant look in his eyes, the Kaiser let out a growl. Then he laughed a very human laugh.

"It's all his fault. That twisted glass sculpture of a boy—he and He Who Rears Hell Within His Mind both. They fought for you, and somehow or other, I must have ended up thinking it would be a shame to let you die. What a sorry sight I've become."

The Kaiser's words were self-derisive. Strangely, though, there was no regret in his voice.

The black dog continued cracking. It was a beautiful sight to behold. Instead of seeming cruel, there was actually a sort of dignity to it. The Kaiser rose heavy to his feet, losing parts of himself all the while, and walked his chosen path with the utmost regality.

The supreme hound came to a stop before Elisabeth.

His innumerable fragments shone brilliantly as they scattered into the sky.

At the glowing black center of it all, the Kaiser spoke.

"Tell me, child. Is being human truly this painful? Is this why you tremble and cry out of fear of losing things?"

"I suppose it is, yes. To be human is to know fear."

"Then you're a strong lot. Your lives are so pointless, yet instead of dying, you live."

Black crystals clinked downward. It was like looking at an hourglass. The pile they made must have once comprised the Kaiser's innards. It was unclear whether or not he felt pain, but if he did, the black hound paid it no heed.

He scowled down at Elisabeth as proud and as lordly as could be.

"Go on, foolish child, and win. Survive. You were the one who slew me...so I forbid you from dying!"

With that, the Kaiser leaped again. A flash of black covered in more cracks than she could count drew an elegant arc through the air.

A second lance strike caught him square in the torso. His gaze, burning with hellfire, landed on Elisabeth.



It was the gaze of someone looking at an absolute fool.

There was something almost human about those eyes, and they nearly resembled Kaito Sena's.



A tiny *clink* rang out.

The most beautiful fragment of all flew up, then vanished.

That was the last of them.

No life remained there.

Elisabeth staggered to her feet. She let out a husky laugh. This time, she shed no tears. Her reserves had run dry long ago. She simply let go of her cracked sword's handle and shouted. "Alice!"

"...Elisabeth," Alice replied. She made her White Knight stand down.

Just as before, Alice dropped a spoon into her hand. No blade could cut her. In fact, there wasn't any sort of attack that could harm her anymore. Yet even so, Elisabeth was prepared to fight to the bitter end.

It was a pathetic display of resistance. However, a silent bellow echoed in Elisabeth's mind.

I have no regrets.

"I have not a single regret."

She had certainly made plenty of mistakes, and her wish might well go unanswered.

But the fact remained that she had reached out and grabbed hold of that one frail hope.

"If any dare call that an error, they shall have me to answer to!"

That was why she had no regrets.

Just a single tiny wish,

not unlike a star.



Elisabeth drew her long sword once more from a swirl of black darkness and crimson flower petals. Her glossy hair swayed behind her as she appeared before the girl. Alice, for her part, was waiting for the Torture Princess without so much as a shred of fear.

Her arms were spread wide, and a broad smile sat plastered across her face.

It was like she was greeting a playmate and for a moment, time seemed to stand still.

Elisabeth's sword was raised aloft.

Alice had her spoon in hand.

Crimson and azure petals were cascading all around them.

The Torture Princess brought her sword down and—

The room was red. It had no windows. It had no doors.

Nobody could leave it. And nobody could come in. It was almost like a graveyard. Or perhaps a prison.

And yet now its nonexistent door had been left wide open.

Inside, Hina was sitting alone. She slowly surveyed the room's interior.

The room's interior, dyed all in red.

The room's interior that, even after getting sealed away in the crystal, Kaito Sena had *coated with his blood as he continued absorbing the world's pain*.

She spoke softly.

"You were never fighting alone, Lady Elisabeth."

And—

Right before Elisabeth and Alice's blows met

someone reached out and caught them.

The ensuing gale force sent the person's tattered cloak flapping about. Their hood hung low, obscuring their face, but whoever they were, they had just caught the blades without so much as breaking a sweat.

Elisabeth frowned.

She could tell—if the person hadn't stepped in, she was the one whose chest would have been gouged out. She looked at the newcomer holding the blades. They really did resemble the Butcher...except for their hands.

Their hands were human.

That was it.

That was her wish.

That tiny, glimmering, starlike,

solitary wish:

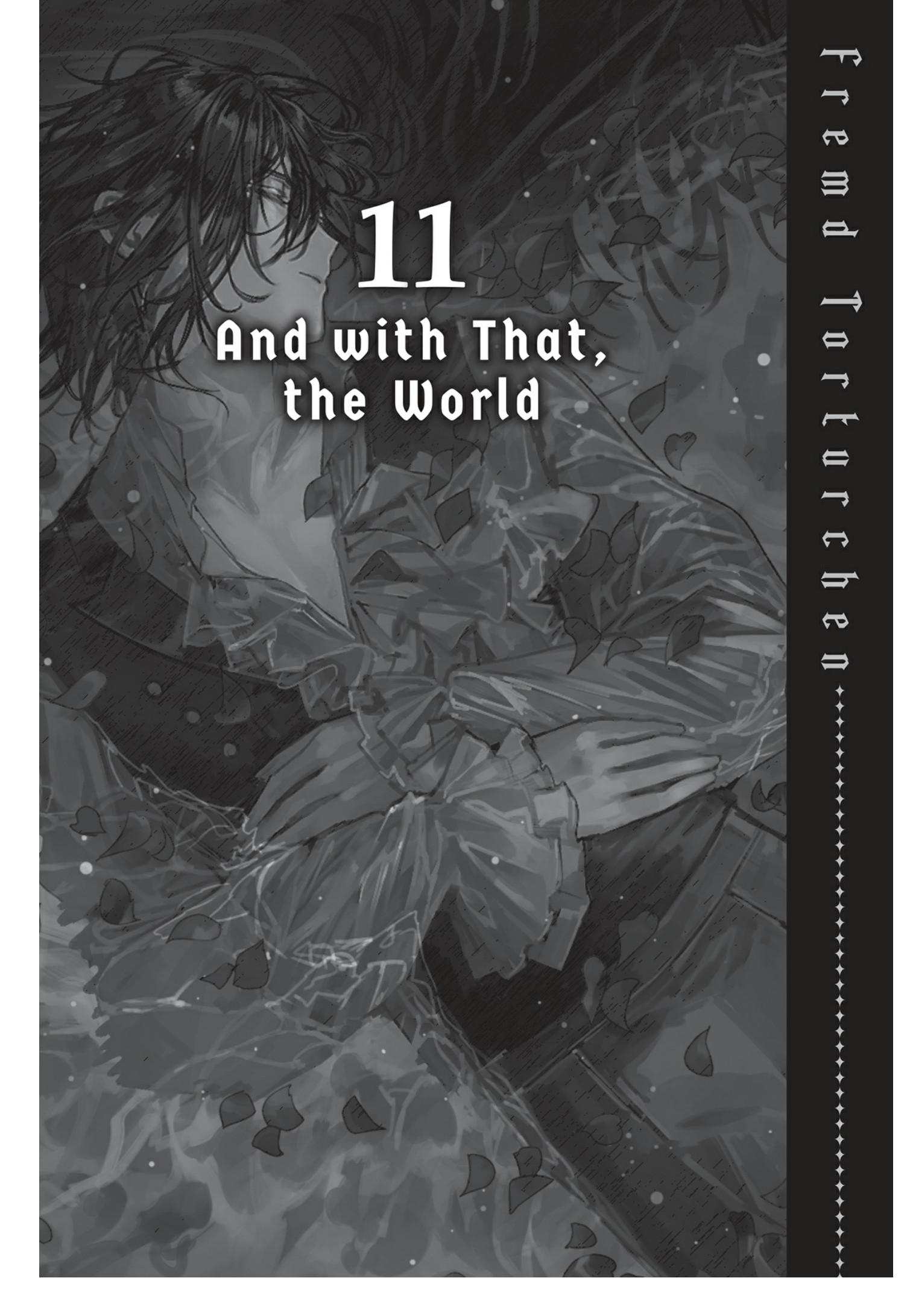
to see him again.

With a thousand different emotions swelling up inside her, Elisabeth Le Fanu spoke.

“—————Kaito, is that you?”

And—

he nodded.



11

And with That,
the World

F r e m d T o r l o r c h e n

11

And with That, the World

It was a tale from long, long ago.

There once was a boy who was brutally killed by another, and there once was a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps there was a child who was abandoned by his parents and a sinner who was abandoned by the world.

By now, there was nobody left who knew how they spent their days.

But the sinner was fine with that.

The two of them used to be together.

That was enough for her.

But that was a big fat lie.

In truth, she had a wish.

A single, glimmering, starlike wish.

For the sinner wanted,

once,

even just once would do,

to see the boy again.



The black cloak flapped away.

When it did, it left behind a familiar figure dressed in a military uniform.

His faded brown hair was tied up short in the back, and he had a boyish face and was short of stature. He was also underweight, and his growth had clearly been stunted.

There was the person who had sacrificed himself to save the world.

It was, without a doubt, Kaito Sena.

He surveyed his surroundings with a quiet confidence. It was then that Elisabeth realized something odd about him.

The amount of mana Kaito had in his body was far greater than it had been before.

He had surpassed the point he'd been at when they called him the Mad King.

In fact, given the state he'd reached...

...he can no longer be considered human.

"Sorry for the wait, Elisabeth. I was gathering the pain of all God's creations, using Diablo to convert it into mana, and transferring it all into my immortal body inside the crystal. I only just got the full amount I needed. Now I have *complete mastery over God.*"

Kaito Sena's tone was calm as he spoke that unbelievable truth. Elisabeth gasped.

In a sense, it was the same as the method she'd conceived of to sever their world's connection to God and Diablo. However, she never imagined that Kaito Sena himself would be the one to attain full control over God.

Elisabeth found herself at a loss for words.

Meanwhile, Kaito Sena snapped his fingers.

It took Elisabeth a moment to realize what had happened. All traces of Diablo, including the ones in her own flesh, had vanished from the world. The ousted demon grandchildren had no doubt suffered the same fate. Kaito had forced God to recognize all of Diablo's acts of violence, including the lesser demons' acts of destruction, as "destruction carried out before the reconstruction."

As such, God had rejected Diablo and expelled it from the world.

It was an unthinkable grand feat, and Kaito had pulled it off with a snap of his fingers. And yet in spite of that, Elisabeth wasn't dead.

Kaito had swapped out her demonic flesh for completely normal flesh that

still generated enough mana to sustain her vital functions.

No mere mage could have pulled off a feat like that.

At that point, Elisabeth came back to her senses. She lashed out at Kaito Sena. "You utter fool! Nobody asked you to go that far! Nobody asked you to shoulder all that!"

"I mean, you say that, Elisabeth, but you're pretty beat to hell yourself. I gotta say, it's not like you. Here."

Kaito Sena snapped his fingers again, and all the wounds on Elisabeth's body vanished in an instant. She blinked. It was only then that she belatedly realized that, at the moment, God and the world loved Kaito Sena with all their heart.

In fact, he and God were now one and the same. His smile was the same as ever, but Kaito was something more than human. He had ascended in every sense of the word.

A smidgen of despair flitted through Elisabeth's mind, but her thoughts were soon interrupted.

"Why... I was supposed to be powerful... You're Kaito Sena! You're Kaito Sena, right?! What did you do?!" Alice screamed. Her voice was filled with a mix of awe and dread. Kaito quietly returned her gaze. He closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded, as though he'd just learned everything there was to know about her. "The Fremd Torturchen, Alice Carroll, Sara Yuuki... Ah."

"See, you got to see him! You got to see him, Elisabeth. So why... Why? Why is it just me... Father, FAAAAATHER!"

"You don't even understand the weight of your sins, do you?" Kaito remarked. "I can't just kill you. Killing you wouldn't resolve anything. So instead, let's do this."

Kaito Sena snapped his fingers once more. The moment he did, Alice's golem body was transformed into a human one, and all her mana faded away. However, she didn't have a chance to get startled by her transformation. The next moment, she vanished altogether.

Alice had been sent somewhere else.

Elisabeth's eyes went wide. That "somewhere else" wasn't even in their world.

Kaito's new influence even extended to other worlds.

As he performed this outrageous feat, he chose—for some reason—to wipe some dust off his uniform. "All right, next up..." He scratched his cheek, then nodded. A long sword dropped into his hand.

The inscription etched in its blade seared itself into Elisabeth's eyes.

"All things are pardoned unto me. But I am ruled by none."

Elisabeth was struck by a terrible premonition. She shouted at Kaito once more. "Kaito, wait! What exactly are you intending to do?!"

"...Ah, right. I should've figured you'd notice."

Kaito smiled awkwardly. Seeing that made Elisabeth feel like she'd just been stabbed in the chest. His smile hadn't changed a bit. Despite all the changes he'd gone through, he was still the same person.

He was, and would always be, her foolish servant.

For even with all that power, Kaito Sena was just Kaito Sena.

And because of that, she needed to stop him.

She faced him and ran her mouth a mile a minute. "I shan't allow it. Not after you only just got free of that crystal. I shan't allow it, not on my life."

"But you get it, don't you, Elisabeth? People have been freed from Diablo's influence. And I've ordered God not to begin the reconstruction, but...as long as I'm around, someone's always gonna show up who tries to use me for evil. Either that or I'll just end up becoming this world's new god." Kaito paused for a moment. Elisabeth could all too easily imagine things playing out that way. People would doubtless flock to him and revere him in God's place. He gave his head a sad shake. "I'd just as soon avoid that whole mess. No good can come of having higher entities remain here."

"Perhaps...but...why would you go to such lengths to protect this world?!"

"Well, that's an easy one. Isn't it obvious?"

Kaito smiled gently, just like he had the last time.

He was the strongest person in the world. He had surpassed even God.

And yet with a look of utmost admiration in his eyes,

“It’s because *you* live here, Elisabeth.”

“What do you intend to do about your promise?!”

Elisabeth shouted the same thing she had once before. She grabbed his hand tight, desperate not to let it go. Kaito Sena could have shaken her off with ease, but he stayed put.

She went on, shouting so hard she was liable to hurt her throat. “You told me, did you not?! You said you would remain by my side! You and you alone!”

“And hey, you bringing me back to life and summoning me here must have been some kind of fate... So until you start walking the road to Hell, I’ll try and stick by your side for as long as I can, even if I’m the only one.”

It was a promise the two of them had exchanged long ago.

Throughout Elisabeth Le Fanu’s bloody life, she was accompanied by a single foolish servant.

The two of them had thought that sounded just fine.

“*Don’t worry,*” Kaito had once said. *“I plan on keeping it.”* And after preventing the reconstruction, he had gone to his slumber inside the crystal. The fact that he was shouldering the weight of the world meant that he wasn’t even able to die. That had been his way of staying by Elisabeth’s side.

But now all he said was,

“I’m sorry.”

With that, Kaito Sena spun his sword around and laid its slender blade against his own neck.

He spoke in the voice of a person waving good-bye.

“Good-bye, Elisabeth. I love you.”

And with that statement, full of an almost-childlike tenderness, Kaito Sena

sliced open his artery.

With the death of their contractor, God and Diablo vanished.

Now their ability to interfere with the world was sealed away,



and a blinding light seared Elisabeth's gaze. Tears gushed from her eyes and sprayed through the air. Her body felt like it was burning. Yet she refused to release that hand. She refused, in no uncertain terms, to let go.

Then she could see nothing, and with that, the world was well and truly saved.

And they all lived happily ever after.

12

A Little Vignette

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12

A Little Vignette

In a city made of concrete and asphalt, there sat a little street corner.

On that corner, a police officer took a young girl into protective custody.

She was a pretty girl with red eyes and white hair.

However, her outfit was filthy, as she'd fallen over on the road.

Rain streamed down as she gazed up vacantly at the sky. The officer helped her up, but she offered no reaction. Upon determining that her life wasn't in any immediate danger, the officer took the girl in to the police station. However, they couldn't figure out who she was, and the girl wouldn't tell them what happened. All she did was mutter.

"Father..."

"Can you tell us where your father is right now?"

The girl still didn't answer. She just went on with tears in her eyes.

"I have nothing. I've been left without a single solitary thing. And yet, "There was someone who cherished me.

"There really was."

The girl just kept repeating that over and over.

As for what would become of her, there was no way for people from other worlds to say.

From there, the rest was up to her.

And that was all there was to that unremarkable little vignette.





13

Elisabeth's
Story

F r e a m d T o r l o r c h e n

Elisabeth's Story

She was back in that old familiar castle.

When she woke up, her dim-witted servant was screwing up breakfast. Beside him, her lovely maid smiled as she lifted up the dishes she'd remade into masterpieces. Elisabeth licked her lips with anticipation, and the Butcher came over to peddle his meaty wares. Their conversations were light and lively, and the hours went pleasantly by.

She was dreaming.

She knew she was dreaming, but she dreamed nonetheless.

If she could, she'd have liked to stay in that dream for the rest of her days.

But she had to wake up.

For she owed her life to another.

And so, Elisabeth slowly opened her eyes.

The first things that entered her vision were the live flowers hanging from the ceiling. Ain and Lute were standing beside her.

Upon seeing them, Elisabeth started to quietly close her eyes back up. However, Ain was one thing, but the other's person's presence didn't make sense. Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up with a start.

Lute was supposed to be dead. Yet there he stood. The one difference was that one of his arms and one of his legs had been replaced with wooden prosthetics. His tail, now noticeably shorter than before, curled up as he spoke bashfully.

"Sir Aguina Elephabred saved me."

He went on to describe how, when he was inside the Sand Queen flesh blob,

he'd heard a voice.

"I said I would congratulate you if you became a father, did I not?"

"I lost mine. But you didn't. This is no time for you to die."

Then, before the blob had a chance to explode, Aguina had spit him out as far as he could.

Later, the beastfolk medics had found him collapsed while they were gathering up the dead bodies.

In her arms, Ain was cradling a young baby—a copper-furred child with the head of a wolf. By the look of it, the child took after Lute. "It's a boy," Ain said, then described how he was growing up healthy and strong.

For some reason, Elisabeth's body hadn't aged a day.

However, Ain and Lute told her, ten months had passed.

They explained to her what had happened.

Nobody with Alice's mastery over dark magic had shown up since, and by all accounts, the world had well and truly been freed from the threat Diablo posed. In the interim, Maclaeus Filliana and the surviving Kings of the Forest had forged a new treaty, and now all the races' survivors were working together as one to rebuild.

"So what exactly happened at the World's End?" Ain asked her. However, Elisabeth didn't tell her the specifics.

She simply gazed off into space as though searching for someone. She looked down at her palms.

All the warmth they'd felt was gone now.

Then, finally, she spoke.

"We needn't worry about God and Diablo anymore," she said.

That was all she told them,

and she did so with a smile.



More time passed.

The red sun had just sunk in the sky, and darkness was beginning to overtake the area.

A single figure was running through the night.

It was a man, clad in a ne'er-do-well's stereotypical droopy hood. He was frequently glancing about as he ran. It seemed his well-practiced movement was paying off, as he didn't see any sign of his pursuers.

Certain he'd successfully made another escape, he breathed a sigh of relief. That caused him to let his guard down.

A slender figure fell on him from above.

Someone had descended like an arrow from the rooftops, mercilessly landing on him high-heels-first. He let out an ugly scream when his attacker trampled his stomach.

The voice that rang out was as cold and as sharp as a knife.

"'Twas obvious your crimes would catch up with you. So why did you think you could escape me? 'Tis precisely what's so irksome about you weaklings who fail to grasp the difference in strength between you and your superiors."

The man frantically looked up at his foe. Her resplendent black hair glittered in the moonlight, and her skin, which her risqué bondage dress lay bare, was captivatingly awash in the light as well. The man let out a cry filled with awe and despair.

"E-Elisabeth!"

"Precisely. I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu."

A sadistic smile spread across the beautiful woman's face.

As she pressed her foot down on the man, she made her bold declaration.

"I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow."



"I caaught him."

“Excellent work!”

As she made her listless announcement, Elisabeth kicked the bound robber forward. The beastfolk responded with their thanks as they approached their captured foe. A bird-headed soldier dragged him down to the dungeons.

Elisabeth rotated her shoulders in exasperation.

Lute walked up to her and handed her a hot cup of tea.

“I would expect nothing less. With this, we can strike another name off the most wanted list. He gave us the slip during that big rash of burglaries, you see, and sniffing him out was beyond us.”

“Well, the blame for that hardly rests with you. He was using a powerful herb to mask his scent. Anyhow, that’s all, correct? I shall be taking my break now. I have an early morning tomorrow.”

With that, Elisabeth turned to leave.

Lute watched her go, then picked up his quill pen. His days in the field were behind him, and now he spent most of his time handling paperwork. He glanced over at the portrait of the child on his desk and smiled.

After surreptitiously watching him for a moment, Elisabeth closed the door behind her.

Nowadays, her job once more was to help defend the peace, and she had helped bring an end to a number of major conflicts. As of a few years ago, though, the bulk of her battles had been against petty thieves. And the crime rate was on the decline.

All of that was due to the fact that problems involving magic had stopped occurring as they once had.

That was a result of the world being cut off from God and Diablo’s influence, no doubt.

Reports had come in from mages from all over about their magic not working. And the one surviving saint, La Filsell, had her wounds close up as well. Nowadays, she was hard at work trying to help bring comfort to the masses.

As magic slowly died out, the world’s economy and flow of goods would

probably end up changing in turn.

In fact, Elisabeth was certain of it.

Eventually, even the Kings of the Forest would succumb to their old wounds. Many truths would be lost or distorted behind history's veil, and once they'd both lost their regents, the other races would slowly fade away. Even religious doctrines surrounding God would shift and change over time.

Eventually, their world might end up becoming not unlike the one Kaito came from.

And for that matter, his world might once have had a grand battle such as ours, Elisabeth mused. That said, there was no way of knowing one way or the other. It was all too easy for history to change based on who was telling it.

Once she returned to her room, Elisabeth dutifully polished the personal effects on her desk—her subordinates' and Izabella's armor and a piece of metal from Jeanne's dress. Then, after putting them back in their places, she double-checked her schedule.

The ceremony tomorrow might well end up marking one such shift in history's winds.

For tomorrow, there was going to be a festival celebrating the twentieth year of Maclaeus's reign.



Fireworks burst into the sky, though nowadays, they operated off metallic reactions rather than magic. People were singing songs, food stalls lined the streets, and cloth banners etched with white-lily coats of arms fluttered in the air as children recited passages praising the king.

The humble festival was being held all through the city.

Over a decade had passed since Armageddon, but they had been so focused on rebuilding that they were still using a provisional royal castle.

In a sense, that just went to show how unmolested their borders had been of late.

The world had seen its share of crises after the battle with Alice, but there

hadn't been any large-scale invasions since.

When Maclaeus came out from inside, the festivities reached their peak. The last of Elisabeth's magic was preventing her from aging, but the same couldn't be said of him. By now, Maclaeus was a man well into middle age. But when the Torture Princess came over and congratulated him in her capacity as a representative from the beastfolk lands, he shed tears all the same. Elisabeth grinned at how he hadn't changed a bit, then patted his head.

"In my eyes, you are still but a youth. You've done well, Maclaeus. 'Tis hard, these days, to imagine you being the same man they once called the Craven King."

That got a big laugh out of the crowd, and they all threw their handfuls of flower petals up in the air in celebration of their king.

Nobody there had a bad thing to say about him.

Once she had finished carrying out her duties, Elisabeth wasted no time in beating a retreat from the official festivities.

Maclaeus had technically asked her to attend the banquet, but raising a glass in private later was more her speed.

She stood alone and surveyed the city. The crowds were still thinner than they'd once been. Even so, though, there were still plenty of people living and making merry. A gaggle of children barreled past her, their fists full of candy. Some of them were of mixed race.

The masses had very nearly come to bear deep grudges against even the mixed-race folk who hadn't supported the revolution. However, the soldiers did a thorough job of cracking down on that, and thanks to their hard work, the mixed-race people had survived. Elisabeth herself had also played a role in those efforts.

These days, nobody called the Torture Princess "the Torture Princess" anymore.

Many people knew of the self-sacrificing battles she'd fought, and as a result, their memories of her past misdeeds had largely faded. However, the dead never forgot. Nor did she. No day would ever come where her crimes could be

forgiven.

Even so, the living had poor memories. Flocks of sheep were, fundamentally, stupid. And due to that innate goodness of theirs, the Torture Princess had become just Elisabeth. It was the exact opposite of how Kaito Sena had become the Mad King.

“...’Tis all your fault, Kaito. *This* is what you left behind.”

It was right then, as the murmur left Elisabeth’s lips.

In that moment, a strand of silver hair softly brushed her cheek.

She felt as though time had just stopped. She turned back and stared into the crowd, then saw herself reflected in a pair of jeweled emerald eyes. However, their gleam soon vanished amid the hustle and bustle of the city. Elisabeth froze in her tracks.

She knew those eyes.

She couldn’t have forgotten them if she’d tried.

She broke into a run and gave chase to that familiar silver hue.



She ran and ran and ran some more.

All the while, she wondered if perhaps she was still dreaming.

A small teleportation circle sat in a back alley. With magic fading from the world, there weren’t many who could still use those. Instead of checking to see if it was trap, Elisabeth charged straight into it.

A moment later, she found herself in a land with a milky-white and rainbow sky.

A pair of pillars stood at the World’s End.

Feathers of white and black and roses of azure and crimson fluttered down from them onto the icy ground.

They descended beautifully, falling like rain or snow would.

Amid that gorgeous sight, a lone woman stood before the pillars.

It was her dearest maid, Hina.

After Kaito's death, she had gone missing. Elisabeth raced wordlessly toward that old, familiar face and nervously brushed her hand against its pale cheek. She could feel it soft under her fingertips. Hina was really there.

Hina gave her a warm smile.

She was holding something in her hand, and she presented it to Elisabeth with great care.

"Here, Lady Elisabeth."

Elisabeth peered into Hina's cupped hands. She was holding a shard of crystal. Elisabeth's eyes went wide.

Inside it, tucked away like a tiny star,
sat Kaito Sena's soul.

Elisabeth realized exactly what had happened. Kaito's body had always been nothing more than a golem. His soul would fade away if he lost enough blood, but there would be a short window thereafter where he could be summoned back again. But even now that that window was closed, it would also have been possible to store his soul in some other receptacle for safekeeping. And a crystal that had been created by God and Diablo would have made for the perfect vessel.

As Elisabeth stared dumbfounded, Hina softly explained.

"This was what Master Kaito wanted. After it all happened, I feared that someone might try to use the crystal and Master Kaito's special soul for evil during the chaos of the rebuilding efforts. Between that and how my gears had largely fallen into disrepair, I had to go into hiding. But now, at long last, I can finally deliver this to you."

"Is...is that so? But if that's the case, then...could it...could it be?!"

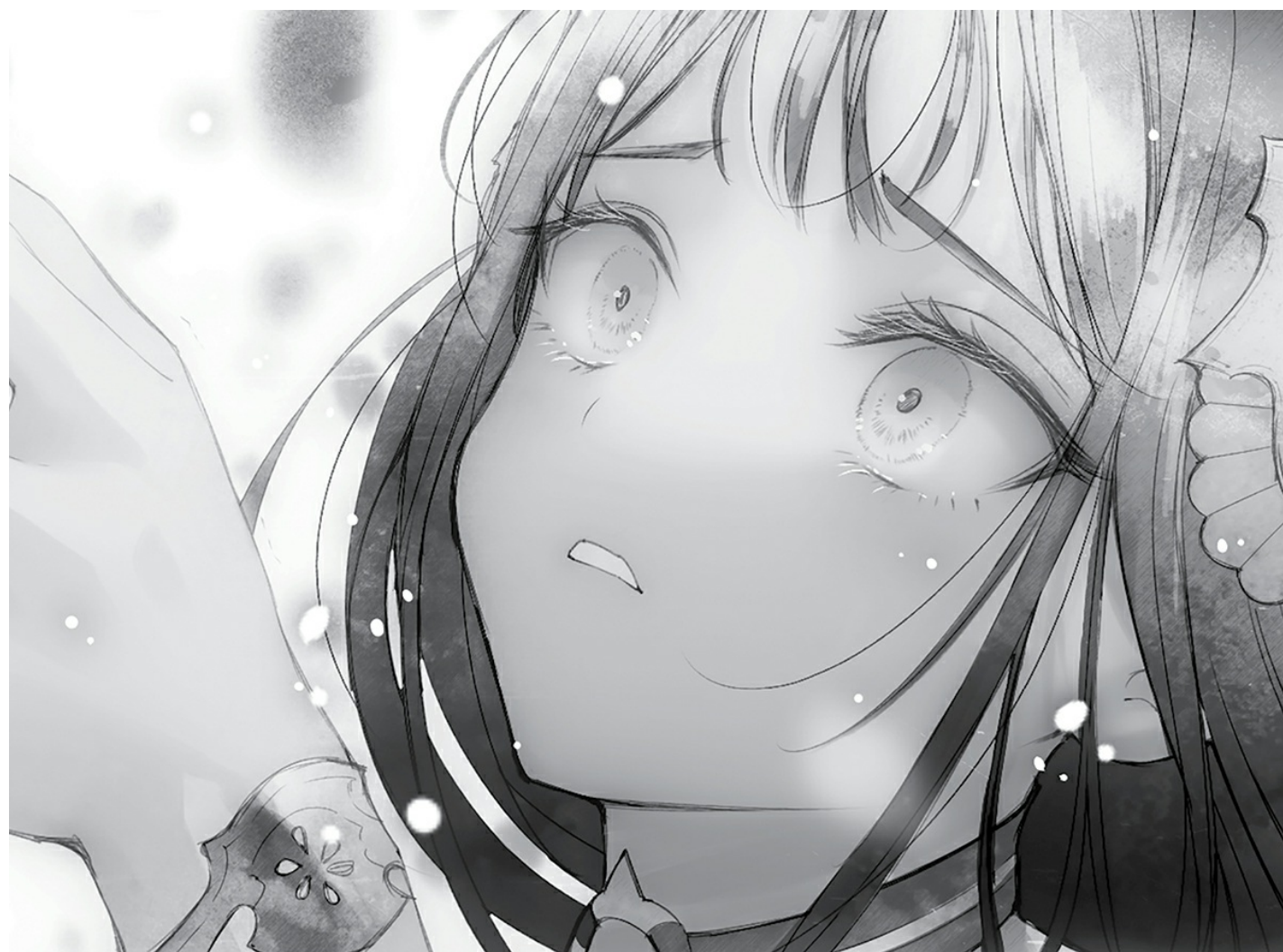
"It is. Now all we need is a vessel."

Elisabeth went silent for a few seconds, then burst into laughter. It was the first heartfelt laugh she'd had in over a decade. She grabbed Hina, reached her arms around her slender frame, and squeezed her tight. Tears welled up in

Hina's eyes as she returned the embrace.

The two of them hugged each other with all their might.

Still holding each other, they began spinning atop the ice like they were sharing a dance. After a good long while of that, Elisabeth came to a stop and grabbed Hina by the hand. They looked each other in the eye and smiled once more.



Then they dashed off as fast as they could.

The two of them tripped and fell more than once.

Even so, they never let go of each other's hands.



A few months passed.

Over at Elisabeth's castle, a magic circle spun into action. Magic had all but vanished from the world altogether, and this would be the circle's final activation. The momentous wish's time had come, and Hina had chosen to wait in the next room over.

Elisabeth had encouraged Hina to come join her, but to no avail. "The two of you need a moment to yourselves," Hina had replied with a smile.

The soul moved from the crystal to the golem Elisabeth had specially made.

A long, long silence fell, one that seemed to last an eternity.

Then the now-powerless boy dressed in an unbecoming butler uniform opened his eyes.

Before him stood a young woman of unparalleled cruelty. Elisabeth grinned as she spoke.

"O Sinless Soul, stricken down in a manner most foul. From this day forth, you shall be my loyal servant."

Her tone left no room for refusal. Belatedly, Kaito realized that he was breathing, and as he let slip a small chuckle of confusion, the girl before him made a dignified proclamation.

"I am the Torture Princess, Elisabeth Le Fanu. I am the proud wolf and the lowly sow."



Another silence descended on them.

Eventually, Kaito burst into laughter, and the corners of Elisabeth's lips curled into a smile. Kaito spoke.

"Welcome home, Elisabeth."

"You're the one who just came back, dullard."

As she spat her insult at him, though, Elisabeth shook her head. It had been so long. As she thought of the time the three of them had spent together, and of the long, long time she had spent alone, she gave her sincere reply.

"'Tis good to be back, Kaito."

That marked the second meeting of the boy who was just Kaito Sena and the girl who was no longer the Torture Princess.



It's time for a story.

It's the story of a boy who was brutally killed by another and a story of a monster who cruelly killed others.

Or perhaps it's the story of a child who was abandoned by his parents and a hero who was abandoned by the world.

It's a story of what happened after the two of them parted ways.

For that was when the tale of admiration, folly, and love ended, and when the tale everyone built up of repentance, hatred, and dreams began.

It was, in the end, a story that needed to be ended.

And so, she took up her sword. And so, they drew their blades.

It's time for a story.

A story of repentance, hatred, and dreams.

A story in which she and they dreamed of saving the world.

A story they dreamed with all their might,

even if it meant throwing themselves to the wolves.

And it's the story of the tiny wish that followed that dream.

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